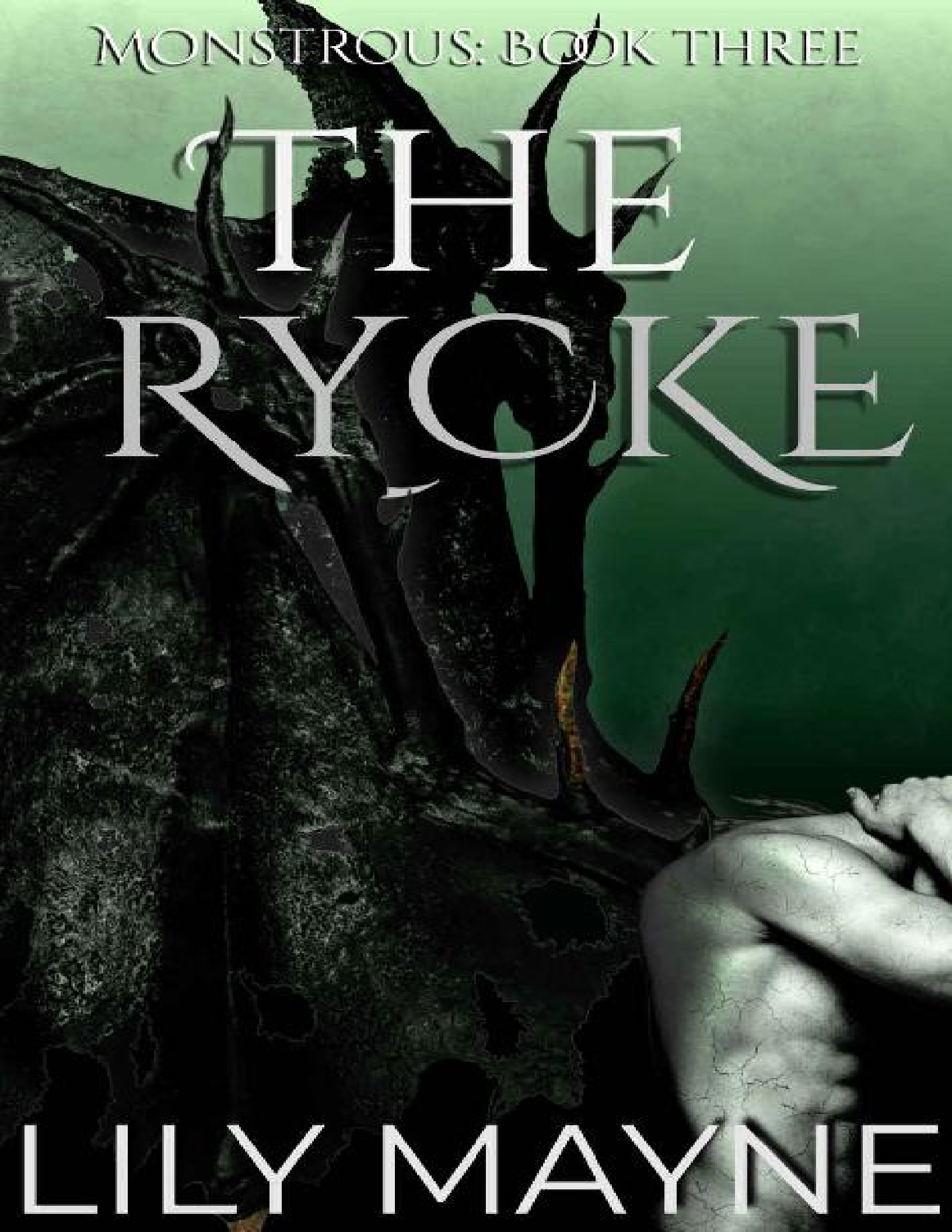
MONSTROUS: BOOK THREE

THE RYCKE



LILY MAYNE

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MONSTROUS
BOOK THREE

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Beta-reading and proofreading by Kate Wood Proofreading

Warning: *This m/m love story contains explicit sexual content and is not suitable for young readers. It also contains graphic depictions of torture and violence, and deals with PTSD.*

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CHAPTER ONE

“So the beasties finally located their monstrous balls and rebelled against the grunts?”

My fellow raider, Rig, gingerly shifted through the debris by his boots with the barrel of his pipe gun as he asked the question, glancing up to look at me from above the studded black leather of his mask. I could see he was grinning, tiny smile lines fanning out from his brown eyes.

I made a face as I crossed the room, boots leaving tracks on the ash-coated concrete floor, and peered around a huge, toppled shelving system. “You say ‘rebelled’ like they weren’t being held captive, and probably tortured. Guessing they hadn’t had an opportunity to bust out before they did.”

I clocked the bank of dead monitors on the gigantic desk in front of me. “Seen these?”

Rig perked up, his interest piqued, and walked over quickly, slinging his long gun back over his shoulder with a gloved hand. I could feel his body practically vibrating with excitement when he brushed past me to see what I was looking at.

“Sweet. Top-secret, military-grade equipment. My fucking fave.” I could hear his gleeful grin in his voice.

“Burnt out and smashed up top-secret, military-grade equipment,” I corrected him drily. Rig didn’t seem deterred in the slightest, already hauling his duffle off his back to start scavenging.

That was what he did best. We each had our strength in our raider camp. Rig’s was fixing, creating. Tinkering. He could make something functional out of literal pieces of junk, and for some weird reason he enjoyed doing it. But then, Rig was weird. He basically lived on hand-rolled cigarettes and vintage porn. Sometimes I wondered how we were friends.

My job? I was our scout. Our tracker. I could slip in and out of places unseen, unheard. I always seemed to be in the right place at the right time to overhear the right conversations; see the right situations. That was why I had the raider name *Ghost*, which I’d adopted almost as soon as I joined the camp.

Most people couldn’t understand how anyone could want to live in the Wastes. How anyone could want to live without the military’s protection, constantly at risk of being attacked by beasties, having to scavenge and hunt and live away from the rest of civilisation.

But I didn’t trust the military, and I definitely hadn’t when I’d still lived in one of the coastal cities, before I turned eighteen and made my way out here. I’d been too young to remember what life was like before, when we had governments, but surely it had been better. When the monsters rose, a big group of governments had worked together to boost military forces. The EU developed their super army. Russia, China and several countries in the Middle East combined forces and nuclear weapons. There was still a large portion of China that was uninhabitable from the nuke they dropped on a particularly monster-infested area.

In the US, our already bloated and wealthy military got pumped full of so much cash it developed the best monster-fighting tech, gear and resources in the world in a shockingly—and in Rig’s paranoid opinion, suspiciously—short span of time. And then the coup happened; the White House fell, and the army took over.

But, turns out, the military isn’t that great at running a country. The population crammed themselves along the coast—in the military’s so-called *safe zones*—and fell into poverty, with too few jobs and not enough space or food or water. Meanwhile, the military pumped everything it had into building the best weapons, the highest-grade tech, and huge shiny buildings that burrowed deep underground to keep even the deadliest of monsters held in their grasp.

This one had been standing out here in the middle of Nebraska for at least ten years, as far as I was aware. Now, it was just a burned-out husk.

“You’ve checked this whole floor, yeah?” Rig was zipping up his duffle and heaving it onto his shoulder. At my nod, he headed toward what remained of a heavy, inches-thick metal door that had been forced inwards by something with *mass*. “Cool. Gonna go check out the other rooms for more stuff.”

“I’ll start sweeping the next floor down.” I watched his tall form disappear through the doorway, the fringe on his suede western jacket swaying. Rig was the only person who could get away with wearing a tan, fringed jacket during the apocalypse. If I tried, I’d look like a moron, but he somehow made it work. He was in love with the thing.

I turned and headed in the direction of the ominous metal staircase I'd already clocked toward the back of the section we were in. It was a massive building, and we had to stick fairly close together at all times.

I wasn't sure how deep this place went. Honestly, this was the first military building we'd been able to poke around in; the first that we were aware of falling under the might of the beasties. Rig had practically creamed his jeans when Anchor had finally told us we could go scavenge, months after it had gone up in a towering column of smoke that had been visible for miles.

The night it had fallen, Anchor had sent me on a scouting mission to see what was happening. I'd camped nearby for a few days, then returned every other week since. In the first few days, I watched the more bloodthirsty beasties roaming the wreckage in search of survivors to pick off. Then a while back I noticed a new set of faint tyre track marks leading away from the building—looked like someone had taken one of the military trucks. But there'd been no other movement around the building.

I'd reported it empty a month ago, but Anchor was cautious. She'd still made us wait. Which was fine—I wasn't going to argue. I was cautious by nature too, and there was a very good possibility that the military would come and remove anything sensitive, or raze the building to destroy the remains, or… *something*. But there'd been nothing.

And even though I agreed with Anchor's cautious approach, she wasn't the one who'd had Rig whining in her ear, practically drooling over the thought of the tech left behind, and fretting over it being scavenged before he could get to it.

Well, it looked like no one else had been here yet to pick anything off. There weren't any other raider camps close, and having the military base fairly near to ours scared off unfamiliar nomads and monsters most of the time. It was why we'd been able to live somewhat peacefully out here.

As I made my way through the shell of the building, I could see some boot prints in the dust and soot. The stuff was thick on the ground and every other horizontal surface. The concrete floor was pitted with bullet holes. Once-gleaming metal doors and window frames had become mottled with dents from gunfire. Anything that had been made of glass was shattered completely, the remaining shards crunching under my heavy boots as I walked, my footsteps otherwise silent. On the surfaces that weren't coated

in ash, old blood had dried and was starting to flake. And there was a *lot* of it.

I was nearly at the staircase, but I kept one ear trained on Rig in the next room, rustling through whatever he'd deemed worthy of his crafting skills. I stepped on something that crunched under my boot but wasn't glass. I didn't look down, seeing as it sounded suspiciously like bone. The sound was uncomfortably loud in the otherwise still silence of the abandoned building.

There was a sudden flurry of movement next door, followed by Rig sucking in a sharp breath.

My body went tense and completely still, ears straining. I thought I heard… something. A faint sound… But as I cocked my head to try and discern the noises better, Rig's raspy voice cut through the air so sharply it made me jump.

"Ghost… Get in here."

I was already moving when he added, "*Now*."

I stepped into the room, shotgun raised, my finger on the trigger. We hadn't had shells for it for years, but it was a good deterrent. I had a crowbar tucked into my belt if I really did need to fend anything off, not that I ever wanted to use it.

I wet my dry lips as I silently made my way over to Rig, eyes darting, trying to find the danger. My heart was pounding. I could feel my pulse jumping at the base of my throat.

Rig was staring at something behind a tall shelving unit, something I couldn't see. He wasn't attempting to reach for his gun, which meant someone—or some*thing*—was either poised to strike, or it wasn't a threat.

When I reached him, looked over his shoulder and saw what he'd found, I couldn't immediately tell which was the case.

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CHAPTER TWO

Fire.

Screaming.

Arms stuck.

Heaviness behind me, can't lift.

Need to think. Trying to think.

Constant noise in my head, memories that aren't mine. Are they? Tidal wave of rage screaming in my skull. Remember tearing bodies apart and ripping into chests but I didn't do that I wouldn't I swear they're not my memories but they might be I can't think

I can't think I CAN'T THINK.

Arms stuck. Heaviness behind me. Need to get out. Need to breathe. Can't breathe but arms are stuck and heaviness is on my back and it's weighing me down, dragging behind me. Help. Need help.

Need help.

New voices. One makes my chest hurt. Reach for it. Don't let it go. Reach for it don't let it go

Reach for it don't let it go quick need it need help arms stuck heaviness behind me

"Please… need…"

Arms stuck heaviness behind me need help need voice can't think CAN'T THINK

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CHAPTER THREE

Rig and I stared in silence for a long, long time, but the creature in front of us didn't move.

They were slumped on their knees, bound arms resting on their thighs. Night-black hair with a strange, greenish sheen fell around their pale face in heavy, dirty hanks. I couldn't see their face, but I could see how deathly white their skin was. I could see the greenish-grey fingernails tipping their weakly flexing fingers.

And the gigantic wings trailing limply on the ground behind them—one completely shredded and ruined, the other like a huge bat wing, dark and sinewy, with thick sharp talons curling out from the top of each finger.

My heart was pounding, and I began to sweat beneath my gas mask. "Did they… did they say anything to you?" I whispered, barely moving my lips, and just managed to stop myself from jolting back when the creature reacted to the sound of my voice, head and long fingers twitching.

Rig's breath shuddered out of his mouth behind his leather mask. "They said 'please' and then started to say they needed something, but…" He shrugged weakly. "Didn't finish. I think… I think they want help getting out of those chains."

At that, the creature's head moved slightly, just enough for us to catch a glimpse of big, mournful dark eyes that flitted over us before lowering again. Their head jerked down in what could have possibly been a nod… but also could have been just another spasmodic twitch.

"I thought you'd checked the whole floor," Rig hissed, voice unsteady. I could tell he was shaken from being caught unaware, especially by a beastie.

I felt a stab of desperate anger at myself. I'd put Rig at risk. What the *hell* was wrong with me? I *had* checked the whole floor, but obviously not well enough.

"I'm sorry," I grated. "I thought I had… I…"

"What… what's the protocol here? Have we ever been told what to do if we come across a…"—he gestured weakly at the creature in front of us —"…an injured and bound beastie… like this? Can we set them free?"

By ‘like this’, he meant intelligent like humans, and potentially dangerous. The military had kept them here for a reason.

I licked my dry lips, grimacing when my tongue touched the warm, damp plastic of my mask. “I don’t know. I don’t… I mean, I guess we weigh up the risks?”

Given something to focus on, Rig seemed to gain some of his confidence back. It helped that the creature had barely moved an inch as we spoke. They seemed… afraid. Timid. And, Jesus, if they were still here and bound months after this place fell and all the other beasties escaped, they clearly couldn’t get out of their chains. So… surely, they couldn’t be *that* dangerous, right?

“Okay, so…” Rig gripped his hips, shuffling his feet a little wider as he stared down at the creature still on their knees. The fringe on his jacket swayed. “Risk—it’s a beastie. Could try and kill us.”

The creature made a sound suspiciously like a whimper and jerked their head to the side. Rig and I glanced at each other. Were they… shaking their head? I couldn’t tell if that made me feel more, or less reassured.

“Risk—um…” Rig scratched at his head under his hood with a gloved hand. “Well, I mean… I guess that’s the only immediate risk.”

Silence fell again, broken only by Rig’s right kneecap cracking as he squatted down to the creature’s level. My heart jumped into my throat and I gripped my useless gun tighter, hands sweating inside my gloves.

“Hey there.” Rig cleared his throat, clearly nervous. “Can you… understand us?”

After a pause, the creature’s head twitched again, then moved to the side briefly, like they wanted to catch a quick glimpse of Rig but were too scared to look at him properly.

“Were you held captive here?” Rig’s voice was calm and soft. Soothing. I’d never heard him sound so gentle.

Pause. Head twitch. Yes.

“Are you stuck in those chains?”

Another head twitch. The chains were wound all the way from the creature’s wrists to their elbows, keeping their arms tightly held together in front of them. God, how long had they been bound like that? Goddamn military—treating living, sentient beings like playthings or experiments. Fuck them.

I swivelled my head around to look for something to help get the creature out of those chains, unable to stand seeing them bound like that for a moment longer. Indignation burned in my chest, the same feeling that had driven me out into the Wastes years earlier. Why did humans have to try and ruin and torture and hurt everything that they didn't fully understand?

"What can we use to get those chains off?"

Rig stood up quickly, the sudden movement making the creature flinch back. "So we're helping?"

"You don't want to?" My voice was rough.

I saw Rig move to grab his duffle. "No, I do. Of course I do." He opened the bag and began rooting through it. "I have a rotary blade in here. Might do it."

He pulled it out and stepped back toward the creature, who seemed to fold in even tighter on themselves. "Hey." Rig's voice was soft again as he knelt back down, holding out the mini saw. "I can try and get the chains off with this, but it'll be loud, and you'll need to stay *really* still, because I'm going to have to try and cut through the chains right down the middle. How does that sound?"

There was a long, tense moment of silence. But then the creature dipped their head again, this time in something closer to a proper nod. Body vibrating, they slowly lifted their shaking arms from their thighs and held them out to Rig.

"Ghost, you'll have to come hold their arms steady."

I took a deep breath and swung my gun back over my shoulder by its strap to free up my hands. As I stepped closer to the pair, I noticed the creature's head twitch a couple of times, fingers flexing. When I kneeled down beside them and Rig, their arms spasmed briefly, and I heard their breath catch.

"I don't… I don't think they like me," I whispered, immediately feeling guilty for speaking like the creature couldn't understand us. If I started acting like that, like they weren't sentient, I'd become as bad as the military and city dwellers.

"Who does?" Rig teased. I could tell he was trying to lighten the mood, because the creature was clearly terrified. I could hear the smile in his voice. "Let's get these chains off, then maybe we can talk some more. Ghost here is going to help hold your arms steady, okay? Are you okay with him touching you?"

I heard the creature’s breaths quicken, sounding dry and rattly in their chest. But despite their body vibrating with tension, they eventually gave another jerky nod. I moved very slowly, reaching out to just stretch out my arms underneath theirs. After a moment, the monster rested the weight of their arms on mine.

“Excellent,” Rig said cheerfully. “Right, you have to stay *completely* still for me, okay?”

Rig switched on the rotary blade and the creature jumped. Rig left it running but waited another ten seconds before leaning forward, giving the monster time to get used to the loud noise.

It took about fifteen minutes of extremely careful cutting, but the chains came off pretty easily. I used the time to surreptitiously study the creature next to me. They kept their face turned down and away from me, so I couldn’t see past the thick, unwashed hanks of hair. They were wearing grey pants and a long, threadbare black coat over an old, once-white shirt, with the sleeves of both pushed up and bunched above the chains.

Their right wing was an absolute mess—it filled me with rage just looking at it. The grunts had *ravaged* it. It was a shredded mess of ruined tendons and strips of dried out membrane that fluttered with the vibrations of the creature’s tense body. I had no idea how much sensation the monster had in them, but I figured logically there had to be a fair number of nerve endings in there, so I could only imagine the agony they’d gone through. Their left wing was ragged but looked pretty much intact, but it hung limply behind the monster just like the ruined one. Maybe one couldn’t work without the other? Or maybe they’d forgotten how to use them, if they’d been chained up here for god knew how long.

Their coat was cut into three strips at the back to accommodate the wings. Through the flaps of fabric, I could see that the shirt had also been raggedly modified, flashes of ghoulishly white skin showing above the line of dirty linen. After finally tearing my eyes away from the monster’s wings, I noticed that it was lumpy beneath the coat’s central panel of fabric, running down the monster’s spine. I wondered what was there.

My gaze moving lower, I finally noticed the monster’s feet. I hadn’t been able to see them before, because they were sitting back on their heels, but from my new angle kneeling beside the creature, I could.

They were like bird feet. Obviously in proportion to the monster’s body, but definitely bird feet. Like crows' feet. Their pants ended just below their

knees, and I could see that the white of their calves faded into grey-black, rough-looking skin. I swallowed at the sight of the monster's talons—they were the thickness of my thumbs and twice as long, with curving, needle-sharp tips. If they wanted to, this monster could rip our bellies open in a heartbeat.

I looked them over again. Despite being unable to see their face, I could tell from their body language that they were afraid and dirty and weary. What had they been doing in these ruins for the last several months? Why hadn't they escaped with the other beasties? Why hadn't they at least attempted to get out of these chains before? They hadn't been *that* hard to cut through with Rig's cobbled-together rotary blade, so the monster would surely have been able to find a way.

Why were they so afraid? They looked tall, and while lean, their body radiated power even in this weakened state. I had no doubt that this monster had strength far greater than either of us—beasties tended to be faster, stronger and smarter than humans. They also lived much, much longer, and with age came experience. Skill.

Maybe this one was very young?

My ears were ringing when Rig finally turned off the saw. Despite the creature's seemingly timid nature, I couldn't help but tense up, expecting the worst, when the chain fell away and landed on the concrete floor with a sharp *clank.*

The monster was shaking, shoulders hunched with tension. At first, they didn't even move their arms from the position they'd been trapped in by the chains for a long, long time. I winced at the sight of all the dried, crusted, dark green blood around their wrists. The deep, black bruising marring their white skin all the way up their inner forearms. The pinched blood vessels in the sensitive inner creases of their elbows.

When the monster finally lowered their arms away from one another, towards their sides, a weak, pained sound left their throat. Their arms trembled, moving stiffly. The veins looked dark and prominent under the white skin, but I didn't know if it was a reaction to the binding pressure of the chains, or if it was normal for their species.

"Hey, it's okay." Rig ducked his head, and I realised he could see the monster's face.

I ignored the stab of… something I felt at the fact that the creature was doing everything in their power to not look at me, literally *flinching* at the

sound of my voice, but was seemingly fine with Rig.

Why had they warmed to Rig and not me? What had I done?

Rig set down the buzzsaw, and after a brief hesitation, slowly reached out and touched the back of the creature's left hand. The monster sucked in a breath and shuddered. Then they slowly turned their hand and laced their fingers through Rig's.

The monster's breath was coming in shallow gulps now, and their body was shaking harder. How long had they gone without touch? Or at least touch that wasn't designed to hurt them? It seemed to be affecting them intensely.

Rig's voice sounded thick when he spoke. "I'm guessing you might prefer not to speak, so if I ask you some simple questions, would you be able to nod or shake your head to answer us?"

The creature didn't answer for a moment, seeming distracted by holding Rig's hand, but then they nodded jerkily again, although they were clearly reluctant to let go.

"Okay, thank you. My name's Rig. This is Ghost."

The monster's head twitched, and I thought they might have glanced at me through their hair. Rig continued, "Were you held here by the military?"

Nod.

"Can you tell us how long you've been here?" Rig hesitated. "Maybe with your hands or something?"

The beastie froze, then shook their head jerkily. Their head twitched up to glance at Rig briefly before lowering once more, their posture almost subservient. The monster's body language screamed fear, like they were terrified of what would happen to them for not being able to answer.

Rig and I exchanged a look over their bent head.

"Okay, that's fine. Doesn't matter. Um… Can you tell me roughly how old you are?"

After another pause, the monster let go of Rig's hands to hold theirs out with long, trembling fingers splayed wide. They held up seven, then all ten, arms shaking violently.

I frowned, staring at the monster's fingers. They were long and elegant. Pale, but their fingernails were a dull, dark green that was almost black, short and blunt despite being in chains for years.

"Seven… seventy?" I asked uncertainly, my mouth pulling down when the monster jerked in reaction to the sound of my voice.

They shook their head and repeated the actions, but curled up their fists to splay all ten fingers wide a second time.

I heard Rig audibly swallow. “Se—seven hundred?” he asked faintly.

Even though we knew some monsters lived an incredibly long time, it was still freaky as hell to know you were in the presence of a being that had been alive that long.

We also knew that a lot of monsters gained strength with age.

The beastie in front of us nodded. Even if they were seven hundred years old, they didn’t seem threatening in the slightest. If anything, they seemed scared of *us*.

“Okay. That’s… okay. That’s fine.” Rig still sounded a little dazed. He paused before asking, “Did… did the humans keeping you here do that to your wing?”

After a second, the monster’s head cocked in a very bird-like movement. Then they slowly looked back over their shoulder. When they saw their ruined wing, their hands spasmed. Their breathing sped up, rattling from their chest.

“Hey, hey.” Rig brushed the backs of his gloved fingers over the monster’s clenched fist to get their attention.

At the feel of Rig’s touch, the monster turned their head back towards Rig but kept it lowered. Body trembling, shoulders hunched back up, they nodded. My pulse jumped when their wings suddenly twitched, the undamaged one lifting maybe an inch before thumping back down listlessly.

“I’m sorry.” Rig sounded genuinely remorseful. He hated anything being in pain or injured as much as I did. “One more question, okay?”

He stopped and lifted his head to look at me. We’d become very good at communicating silently over the years. I knew what he was thinking. I nodded once.

Rig looked back down at the monster, gently took their hand again, and spoke. “Would you like to come with us?”

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CHAPTER FOUR

When Rig rose gracefully to his feet and the monster followed him up far more unsteadily, I recoiled in shock. “Their leg.”

Rig’s shoulders flinched when he looked down and saw. The monster’s left shin, right around where their skin darkened into their crow’s feet, was bent at an extremely unnatural angle.

I swallowed down bile. They’d been *resting* on that foot for our entire encounter with them, and god knew how long before. They had to be in agony.

“Jesus,” Rig breathed.

And then, like we both finally woke up, we snapped into action and stepped forward to support the monster. I curled an arm around their back and felt the way their entire body tensed at the touch. In any other situation, I would have pulled away if I really made them that uncomfortable, but they definitely couldn’t—or at least shouldn’t—support themselves on that leg, and I was pretty sure both Rig and I were needed to shoulder some of their weight. Those wings alone had to weigh the equivalent of two fully grown men. I couldn’t imagine what it was like dragging that dead weight from your back constantly.

Standing up, the monster was almost a foot taller than me, and several inches taller than Rig. Their arms fit comfortably round our shoulders while we gripped their sides.

Between the three of us, we managed to get outside. The small, old cargo trailer we’d dragged all the way here sat dully reflecting the sun, looking at home amidst the collection of metal scraps and debris that littered the ground outside the ruined building.

“Not far now, buddy.” Rig patted the monster’s pale hand where it draped in front of his left shoulder. I saw the monster’s fingers quickly grip Rig’s gloved ones, knuckles whitening even further. They were still trembling hard beneath our hands, and their breathing was quick and unsteady.

I wanted to comfort them, but I couldn’t think of anything to say that wouldn’t sound like empty platitudes. Rig was better at that stuff than me. Maybe that was why the monster had warmed to him and not me. I

probably came across as cold, but I couldn't help it. My job involved being a shadow. Being invisible. Socialising wasn't something I had to do very often, and I was shit at it.

For some reason, the thought of this strange, damaged creature thinking I didn't care made my chest hurt. I wanted to tell them I *did* care. I wanted to tell them that I hoped we could help them. I wanted them to feel better. I wanted their wings fixed.

But I kept my mouth shut, sweating beneath my gas mask under the monster's substantial weight and already worrying about what would happen when we got back to camp.

After we gently eased the monster onto the narrow trailer, I straightened up and nodded at one of the military trucks nearby. Most were on their sides with doors ripped off. A couple had completely caved-in hoods and roofs, like something large and heavy had jumped on them. One, though, looked intact.

"Think you can get that running?" I asked Rig.

After heaving his duffle off his back and dropping it on the ground, he looked over, eyes narrowing above his mask. "Maybe." Rig had trained as a mechanic before making his way into the Wastes, to work on the poorly run buses that acted as public transport in New Maryland.

If we could drive, it would take us a fraction of the time to get back that it had taken us to walk here, especially as we'd been dragging the trailer the whole way behind us. We'd left the moment it got light, and it was already late afternoon.

I quickly followed Rig as he made his way over to the undamaged truck, not wanting to hover awkwardly beside the silent beastie who clearly felt uncomfortable around me. As we made our way around the car to the driver's side door, we both recoiled.

The top half of a soldier—everything from the waist down missing—was hanging out the side of the car, the door open. One arm was resting over the lip of the open side, a half-rotted hand outstretched in the footwell. Luckily his face was turned down into the ground, but I could see the dull white of his skull through patches of hair and grey skin on the back of his head.

I swallowed hard and heard Rig's breath hitch beside me. This guy had nearly made it. I wondered what had got him. What had—I averted my eyes—ripped him literally in half.

Feeling sick, I stepped forward, wanting to spare Rig the unpleasantness of moving the body. I could see how pale he was above his mask, eyes burning as his brows pinched together.

"I—Do you want me to—?" He sounded queasy.

"I got it, man. Don't worry." Keeping my gaze away from the brown and black meat of the open wound where the soldier's hips should have been, I grabbed the thick sleeve of the outstretched arm and pulled. My gorge rose when the skin underneath moved too readily with the fabric, like it was sloughing off. I pulled quickly, discovering that half a body wasn't overly heavy—particularly one wasting away. It was knowledge I could have lived without. The moment the body was clear of the vehicle, I dropped the arm and stepped back to Rig, who was straightening up after grabbing something from the footwell. He turned to me and held up a set of keys.

Despite our good fortune, I couldn't bring myself to smile. "No need to put your hotwiring skills to the test, huh?"

Rig made a noise that was probably supposed to be a chuckle. We walked back over to the beastie, whose back was to us as they sat, still and silent in the trailer. My gaze was drawn to their huge wings as we approached. In the sunlight, they had a jewel-green hue that shifted in and out with the tiniest of movements, like a beetle's carapace. I traced my eyes over the damaged wing again, feeling a sharp stab of sympathy.

We helped the beastie back up and slowly led them to the car. After they gingerly shifted onto the backseat, Rig turned and walked back over to grab the trailer and his duffle, muttering something about trying to cushion the monster's leg. I watched him pull the trailer over to the car and grab the two sleeping bags that I'd put in there before we left.

The car was a four-by-four, so the trunk was roomy, and I managed to shove the trailer in there after slotting it in at a skewed angle. I hovered awkwardly by the back door for a moment, then decided to just get in the front passenger seat and wait as Rig tried to prop up the monster's broken leg.

Rig swung into the driver's seat a minute later. "Well." He cleared his throat. "This is a treat, huh?" He didn't sound all that enthusiastic about it, though.

He shoved the key in the ignition and started the car. We didn't say a word as we drove away from the gutted military base, past the ruined

trucks, past the watch towers, past the tall, barbed wire-adorned fence at the perimeter.

I shifted in my seat, clutching my shotgun and backpack between my knees, staring out as the green fields flew by fast. I was twenty-six, so I'd been just six when the monsters rose. I had only faint memories of being in the backseat of my parents' car, on our way to visit grandparents or go to some loud, child-friendly themed restaurant for dinner. Truthfully, they felt like a story now. Like all those early memories had happened to someone else, and I'd just read about them in one of the many books our old leader, Cat, had hoarded in his room at the camp.

We'd previously had two camp leaders—Anchor and Cat—but Anchor was our sole camp leader now. Six months ago, Cat had gone missing. I'd been searching for him since, but it was like he'd vanished into thin air. While we operated as best we could democratically, we still needed some type of leader to keep us in check, and for some in our group, keep us human. Living in the Wastes, it was easy to disconnect from the rest of humanity and become truly savage.

Not that the humans living in the built-up, military controlled cities didn't think of us as savages anyway. To them, anyone who willingly lived closer to or—in some very rare cases—side-by-side with the beasties were no better than animals.

To us, the grunts were the animals. Capturing and torturing monsters just because they were different? I mean sure, some of them were… mind-bogglingly deadly and powerful, but generally they left you alone if you left them alone. Just like any other big predator. Don't go into a black bear's territory and it'll leave you be. For the most part, the beasties were the same.

The rare occasions where that wasn't the case were why the Wastes existed. Swathes of land that had been scorched and ruined and left to decay after battles between humans and monsters. In those cases, the monsters almost always won.

The military base was several hours from our camp. Before this journey, I'd scouted out spots for us to sleep overnight. Places that showed no signs of disturbance from beasties or wild animals or other raiders. Places that were tucked away so we were unlikely to be stumbled upon by anything roaming the night. I'd done it plenty of times in the past, so I was used to it, but I knew the thought of sleeping outside of the camp made Rig nervous.

I leaned over and checked the fuel gauge on the dash. Less than a quarter of a tank. I wasn't sure it would get us back to camp, but I didn't voice that to Rig, who was looking beyond relieved at the prospect of not having to spend a night vulnerable out in the Wastes.

"I think it's probably better if you talk to Anchor when we get back," Rig said to me as we drove; the first time either of us had spoken since we'd left the military base behind.

I turned my head to look at him.

"You'll stay calm and reasonable," he said. "I'll just get loud."

My lips quirked on one side. "At least you're aware of your shortcomings."

Rig exhaled. "It's probably better if I stay with the beastie and take them to see Apollo." Apollo was our medic.

I sobered, looking down at my gloved hands and nodding once. "Yeah. They don't seem to like me much. You'll make them more comfortable." I looked back over at Rig. "Anchor will want to see you—and them—though." I wondered what the monster's name was. If they'd ever tell us.

Rig nodded again. "I know."

We fell quiet. The monster was stiff and tense and silent in the back; long, pale fingers gripping the seat tight either side of their legs. At one point, the car dipped hard into a pothole and I heard the beastie suck in a sharp breath of pain. I turned around quickly to check on them, but they immediately dipped their head, dark hair covering their face. All I could see was a deathly pale forehead and the slope of a small nose.

"You okay?" I asked, voice coming out terser than I meant it to.

The monster jerked their head once in an immediate nod, body tensing up even more. I figured I was making it worse, so I turned to face forward again, shooting a self-conscious glance at Rig along the way. He didn't comment on how uncomfortable I seemed to make the monster, but it was obvious to both of us.

We were forced to stop for the night when the car ran out of gas. The sky was a deep purple, and we were still a distance from the camp, though not all that far, which made it even more frustrating.

We pulled the trailer out of the car and helped the beastie onto it. Rig stuffed his duffle in the space beside the monster's long body as I headed to the front and grabbed the trailer's handle, waiting. Rig joined me a moment later. After a final, silent look at each other, we started pulling.

"Jesus Christ," Rig muttered, voice strained as we dragged the trailer behind us. The monster was freaking *heavy*. I thought it was those wings adding most of the weight, but the beastie was still tall and pretty substantial.

It didn't take us that much longer to reach one of the tucked away spots I'd already scouted. The light was quickly dying, so I went about setting up our camp by rote, having done it on my own countless times before.

This time, though, I worried constantly about the night ahead as I pushed the trailer into the shallow cave and pulled out our sleeping bags. I'd only packed two, not expecting to gain another companion on this journey. But the monster could have mine. I wasn't going to sleep tonight.

The monster might have appeared docile, but it could all be an act. There was no way I was putting Rig or myself at risk by leaving us totally unguarded around them. I'd already put Rig in harm's way once today by not spotting the monster when I checked over the floor at the military base. Once was enough.

Rig chatted to the beastie about nothing in particular while I silently set up our tiny camp. We couldn't have a fire and risk any nocturnal monsters spotting the glow of it in our little alcove in the rocks, so that meant I only had the dying daylight to get us prepared for the night ahead.

There was a tiny town not far from here, but I knew that a monster had made its nest in one of the abandoned buildings and was fiercely protective of its territory. I'd made the mistake a few years back of passing through, hoping to scavenge, and having to run for my life when a big creature with three muscular legs and a bulbous head started chasing me, almost impossibly fast.

That had been a close one.

"You hungry?" Rig asked the monster, who we'd helped off the trailer and settled against the shallow dip of the cave wall. It didn't look comfortable with their wings bent and half-stuck underneath them, but we didn't have many options.

The monster's head hung forward, dark hair hanging in front of their face. Their broken leg was stretched out in front of them, and my gaze

snagged for a few moments on those thick, deadly talons.

When they gave an almost imperceptible shake of their head in answer, Rig and I exchanged a look. The monster was almost… catatonic. Which was understandable, but still unsettling.

"So I guess that was a… rare moment of lucidity when we found them back at the base?" I muttered to Rig as he passed me to grab his duffle off the trailer. "They're not very, uh… responsive anymore."

Rig shrugged helplessly, but his brown eyes were worried as they cut over to the beastie, brows furrowed. "I don't know, man. I think they're in shock."

"I'll keep an eye on them." I nodded at the sleeping bags. "You need to get some rest."

"You need to sleep too," Rig protested, but I shook my head.

"I won't be able to sleep. I'm used to it. Been out here a lot. Normally alone, remember?" I shot him a small smile, knowing he'd be able to see it in my eyes despite the gas mask covering my mouth.

Rig shook his head, frowning. "We'll take shifts keeping watch."

That wasn't going to happen, but I decided to drop it for now. I'd offer to take first shift, and then I just wouldn't wake Rig up. Simple.

Truth was, I didn't really trust anyone else to watch over me when I was so vulnerable—not even Rig, who I arguably trusted more than anyone else in the world.

He wasn't a fighter, though. Rig was impulsive, a little immature and excitable. He wasn't ruthless. He wasn't good at making snap decisions or reacting fast. If any beastie stumbled upon us in the night, he'd panic.

Not like I was some amazing ninja killer or anything. I really, *really* hated killing anything, so it rarely happened. I much preferred hiding, keeping a low profile and running if something saw me and wasn't overly happy about my presence.

I'd killed three beasties during my eight years in the Wastes—when I'd had no other choice—and I remembered every single time with perfect clarity. I hated it. I'd yet to kill any humans, but some part of me, deep in my soul, told me it was only a matter of time before that happened out here.

I cut my eyes back over to the silent beastie. My gut was telling me they weren't a threat. But shit, what the hell did my gut know? This was literally a creature *from another world*. Who knew how they acted? What their

thought processes were like? I wasn't going to make the mistake of humanising this creature, even if they *were* pretty humanoid in appearance.

But I'd heard the rumours about the other humanoid monsters out here. Ones who could turn to smoke, or suck all the blood out of your body through your skin, or stop your heart with just a touch. A humanoid appearance meant jack shit when it came to the beasties.

"Jesus, it's freaking hot."

Rig's voice made me look away. I busied myself with opening my bag and pulling out my water bottle, but couldn't help side-eyeing Rig. "You're the one who insists on wearing a leather mask."

"Yeah, because it looks hot as shit." Rig thudded to the ground with a grunt, leaning back against the wall of the shallow cave as he opened up his own bag.

I rolled my eyes and ignored him, pulling my mask up just enough to gulp down some water before fixing it back in place, my gaze cutting over to the beastie self-consciously. Their head was turned away from us and tilted slightly down, but I couldn't tell if they were looking at something or just staring into the middle distance.

I eyed their intact wing, the one closest to us. It had that faint, emerald-green sheen that was almost beautiful in the last of the sunlight. The membrane between the long, bony fingers looked paper thin yet somehow still leathery.

I wondered what the texture was like. I wondered if they could feel touch. Part of me hoped not, because surely that would mean they'd felt everything that had been done to the ruined one. But I also couldn't help imagining taking off my gloves and running my fingertips over the membrane. I flushed at the thought but couldn't tear my eyes away.

The vibrant hues of the sunset shone through the beastie's intact wing, illuminating it with a faint glow that picked out all the tiny, black blood vessels where they spanned between the thick fingers like delicate plant roots. I stared, trying to imagine what their wings would look like fully extended.

My eyes shifted upward to their face, wanting to see them properly. I couldn't, because their head was turned away, but their dark, chin-length hair had parted around some unusual grey protrusions behind their ear and down the side of their neck. They looked almost like barbs, but not made

out of a hard material. Like they were flexible, although the frond-like edges looked dangerous. Sharp.

The more I looked, the more I found to stare at. My eyes greedily took in everything they could. The monster was so fascinating. And it wasn't like I hadn't seen other monsters before. Of course I had. But something about this one was riveting to me. Or maybe it was because it was so rare that I came across a beastie who didn't immediately try to attack or eat me out here.

Speaking of eating, Rig was pulling the food out of his bag and handing one of the packages to me. Before I could, he'd heaved himself up and walked over to the beastie, offering them some. They shook their head silently.

He returned to my side, and we sat and ate with minimal talk, masks hooked around our necks. The dried meat was good, smoked using a special method by Bo, one of our camp cooks. After we finished, we drank some water and fixed our masks back in place, then settled in as the sky darkened rapidly, preparing for a long night.

Rig grew more tense beside me, antsy at the thought of spending a night out in the Wastes. I tried to comfort him by patting his arm, telling him in a low voice that the odds of anything coming across us were slim, even though that wasn't entirely true. But I'd scouted this area and never seen tracks or other signs of beasties, so there was every chance we'd get lucky.

Not that it happened often in the Wastes, but still. There was a chance.

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CHAPTER FIVE

My first night alone in the Wastes, I was eighteen.

Truthfully, most people's first nights alone in the Wastes were when they turned eighteen. When they became adults and could make their own decisions.

Some enlisted. Others ventured out on their own. Most stayed in the cities, though.

I hadn't known what true darkness was until that night. I'd only ever known night under light-polluted skies. Even before the monsters came, when my family lived on the outskirts of Chicago. But out in the Wastes, there were no lights. And when the moon was new, like it was that first night, it became pitch black the moment the sun went down.

I was terrified. The kind of terror that left you frozen in place, constantly on the verge of tears. The kind of terror I'd never felt before, not even when the monsters rose. I'd been too young to truly know what was happening then, my parents shielding me from the worst of it.

I'd left the city in the morning, my heart in my throat, half-expecting the soldiers guarding the big front gate to stop me and tell me that I wasn't actually allowed to leave. But they'd let me through with barely a glance.

I'd walked for miles, regretting every step, wanting to turn around. But I couldn't. I couldn't bring myself to go back to that cramped, dirty pit of humanity. Back to no purpose and no quality of life. At least out here I had choices. I had a chance to *do* something. To be useful.

I'd started panicking when the sky darkened, turning orange, then red, then a deep, bruised purple. My only possessions were in my backpack—two full canteens of water, some protein bars and jerky, a hunting knife, a small medical kit and some spare clothes. That was all I'd been able to scrape together after months of saving from my shitty job running deliveries for some shady businessman who fronted as a fishmonger.

I could feel those meagre possessions jostling around in my bag as I began to jog when the sun dipped below the horizon. I'd been on the edge of a suburban street, and I'd chosen a house at random, praying it was empty.

It hadn't been.

Something had watched me that night. As I huddled in the corner of the dusty house's living room, too petrified to move, my eyes open wide against the absolute, pressing blackness, I'd felt it. I'd felt something watching me. I'd heard tiny sounds, like the shifting of skin and hair, coming from the top of the stairs. I'd known instinctively that it hadn't been human eyes on me.

My heart had been pounding so loud in my chest that I was convinced it would make the thing watching me attack. That it could hear the blood pumping through my body, hot with fear and adrenaline.

The moment it had gotten light, I'd run. As fast as I could, for as long as I could, until I was dripping with sweat, breathless and barely able to move from the stitch in my side. When I'd stopped under a tree and gulped down water, grasping my side, I'd heard a twig snap behind me.

I'd spun around and come face to face with Rig. We'd stuck together ever since.

Rig had been almost weepy with relief at finding me. He'd been kicked out of his city for stealing, having only recently turned seventeen. There was no room for prisons in the already cramped coastal cities, so some of them chose to punish their criminals by banishing them to the Wastes. Some just killed them.

There were rumours that the military took the worst criminals to some secret place in Texas to dispose of them, or threw them into a particularly nasty monster nest there, but I wasn't sure if I believed those. Rumours got distorted easily out here, passing between raider camps with weeks-long gaps, during which time the people telling the stories conveniently forgot certain details and just decided to embellish.

Rig had been stealing parts from the mechanic shop he'd been apprenticing at. He'd been caught. He'd told me his mom had stood at the city gates, weeping as the soldiers kicked him out into the Wastes with a raggedy backpack containing just a bottle of water, some crackers, and a spare pair of underwear that they had told him was for "when he saw his first monster and shit himself—if he lived long enough to need them".

Yeah, to say he'd been relieved at finding me was an understatement.

With someone else there, someone else to watch out for, the total darkness became a little less petrifying. A little more manageable. It helped that Rig was an excellent scavenger and had a knack for cobbling things together to make them work. Even though he hadn't been that much

younger than me, he'd *seemed* it. I'd been mentally preparing myself to come out to the Wastes for over a year. Rig hadn't had a choice.

We spent a few weeks making our way across the Wastes together, nearly getting eaten or murdered by monsters more times than I cared to think about, before Cat found us while he was out scavenging. He took us back to his camp, which was where we'd been ever since.

Rig didn't leave camp often, only when we found a new place that had plenty to scavenge. He didn't like leaving the camp. He'd hated every single night spent sleeping in the Wastes. Hated how vulnerable you were. How no place was truly safe.

He still hated the total darkness.

Which was why I knew he was awake beside me, even if I hadn't been attuned to his breathing pattern. It was too quick, too shallow, for him to be asleep.

I was used to how dark the nights got out here now. I'd spent many nights alone in the Wastes, feeling that same fear that never truly went away. It wasn't any less terrifying every single time there was a faint noise in the dark, just because I'd experienced it so often.

Like right now.

Rig's breath caught when the sound came again, and I reached out silently and gripped his arm.

Something was shuffling over the ground toward us. I could hear it sniffing—loudly, wetly—and my heart clenched up in my chest. It could smell us.

I wondered what the injured beastie was doing. I knew they hadn't left, because I'd been sitting here awake, in the total darkness, my ears straining for the smallest sound. I hadn't heard them move.

I barely managed to stop myself from jumping out of my skin when the thing grunted, a raspy, yet shrill sound that was more demonic than animal. Rig's gloved hand fumbled to grip mine, still resting on his arm, and when he tightened his fingers the leather of his glove creaked.

It went totally quiet.

My chest was heaving as I took quick, silent breaths through my nose under my gas mask, eyes wide and unseeing, the black of the night pressing against my eyeballs. I strained my ears, trying to be ready for any tiny noise that might come next, trying to see if I could, in any way, work out what direction it was coming from.

Whatever was out there shuffled closer in a few terrifyingly fast steps, and Rig let out a tiny little gasp from beside me, unable to control it. I pressed my lips tighter together under my mask, hot yet shivering with fear, sweating despite the cold air.

The thing snorted with excitement, and for a second I wondered if it could smell my fear-sweat. If I was drawing it to us like a beacon. Something brushed against my front, ruffling my hair, making me jump as my heart spasmed and thudded too hard against my breastbone.

I couldn't move. I was frozen, trying to make sense of what was happening. I could hear the thing shuffling, still far away, but I could feel something touching me. Oh, god. What was it?

Somewhere in front of us, in the blackness, the creature made another wet sniffing sound. And then the thing touching me shifted slightly, sending a fresh spike of fear through me. Against my forehead I felt a thin, leathery texture that stretched, but I was too terrified to move.

The thing in the darkness made another low grunt, sounding rabidly excited at sniffing something out in the night. I heard it take a few steps closer, and my entire body tensed, preparing to… I wasn't sure what. I couldn't just run like I normally did. I wouldn't leave Rig.

I wondered if I'd be able to reach my crowbar in time. The shotgun was useless. Empty.

But then the creature went still, and I heard it take in another deep sniff. Then it… *whimpered*. Suddenly it was making sounds of fear. No, not just fear—pure terror. I heard it scrambling back, faster than it had been moving before. My blood was pumping hard, the pulse in my throat palpably jumping, as I listened to whatever had been out there—stalking us—run away as fast as it could.

All went silent for long moments, and I jumped violently when a low, smooth voice spoke out in the darkness. "It's gone."

The beastie. The beastie had spoken. Rig and I stayed frozen, still trying to process what had just happened. But a small part of my brain was hearing the monster's voice on a loop, over and over. It had been low and masculine, but soft. Gentle.

Before I knew what I was doing, my free hand was reaching forward to touch whatever was still brushing against me. My breath caught when my gloved fingertips feathered over something flat and smooth that moved under the pressure. I heard the beastie shift and felt the thing ripple.

It was the beastie's wing, I realised immediately—the one that wasn't damaged. Even through my gloves I could feel the hard, hollow bone of the finger, and that paper-thin leather that rippled again as the monster stretched their wing out further.

They were covering us, I realised. With their wing.

They had protected us.

The monster made a soft, pained noise as, beneath my fingertips, the wing moved inward, back towards the monster's body. I suddenly remembered when they had tried to move their wings before, at the base, and it had seemed like they couldn't. Like the intact one was useless without the damaged one. Had it hurt them to stretch it out to cover us?

The monster didn't speak again for the rest of the night. None of us did, and I knew it was from sheer terror in the case of Rig and myself. We didn't dare say a word in case anything else was out there, lurking, about to stumble across us.

My eyes were burning by the time the sky started to turn grey. I felt sweaty and grimy, particularly along my right side where Rig was pressed tightly against me. He'd managed to doze off at some point, his head a heavy weight on my shoulder, keeping me tense and stiff in place.

The faint outline of the beastie came into view, still sitting in the same position. Their wing was tucked back behind their body, and their head was turned to the side, away from us, like they were looking at something far in the distance to our right.

I saw them tense slightly when I gently lifted Rig's head so I could get up. He snorted and blinked open tired, bloodshot eyes before gazing blearily at me.

"Shit, I'm tired," he croaked, voice rough.

I grunted in response as I stood up and stretched out my aching limbs. My knees were stiff and sore from sitting with my legs bent all night, pulled up towards my chest. I could have sworn my elbows creaked when I straightened my arms fully, clasping my fingers together above my head.

"We should get moving," I rasped, pulling my water bottle out of my bag and lifting my mask an inch to take a long sip. Rig did the same, and in the space of me hesitating, wondering if I should offer the beastie some water, he had already ambled over and held out the bottle to the winged monster.

Then the beastie turned their head to look up at Rig with big, pitch black eyes, and I got my first proper look at their face. Their dark, greenish-black hair was no longer falling over it in unwashed waves.

I exhaled a sharp, quiet puff of breath, glad my mask muffled the sound.

They were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

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CHAPTER SIX

I could feel myself staring too intently, unable to look away. My palms were getting clammy inside my gloves, and my heart was thudding in my chest with a confusing rush of… something.

The monster's eyes were almost solid black, with just a hint of white at the corners. Big and mournful, like they'd seen too much already. They probably had.

I could only see their side profile, but it was enough. Their face was narrow and deathly white, but thin black veins spidered out from their temple, raised around their eye socket, above their straight dark eyebrow and over the high point of their sharp cheekbone. Their lips were pale, only a shade darker than their skin. Their jaw was cut, nose small and straight.

Their features were a fascinating blend of delicate and masculine. Almost androgynous. I couldn't stop staring.

As soon as I registered that I was openly gawking, I forced my eyes away. I tried to push away the overwhelming wave of awe I had experienced when I'd gotten my first proper look at them, but it was difficult.

What is wrong with you? I thought to myself, feeling my cheeks get hot, glad my face was at least half hidden under my gas mask. *They're clearly traumatised. In pain. They don't need some random raider creeping on them.*

They probably hated humans. They were probably just scared and knew they needed help and we were the first to come along.

But I couldn't take my eyes off them. Even filthy and injured, the beastie was… breathtaking. Their features were unusual, almost alien, but they worked together in perfect harmony. They were fascinating.

"You don't want any water?" Rig was saying, and the beastie actually shot him a tiny smile as they shook their head, making my stomach flutter with nerves, and something else I wasn't ready to name.

Rig huffed an amused sound. "That's wild. That you don't need water to survive, I mean. But pretty cool I guess, huh?"

My heart was thudding as I silently went about gathering all our shit back up so we could get moving. Half of me wanted to openly stare at the

beastie in awe, much like the urge I'd had the day before, while the other half was too nervous to even glance in their direction.

I didn't speak as we helped the beastie back into the trailer, listening to Rig as he chattered aimlessly just to fill the silence. We set off, and after an hour of pulling, my shoulder was screaming.

Rig and I had a brief, silent conversation and switched sides to pull with our opposite arms, which we did for another two shockingly uneventful hours. We saw several beasties on the way, on the horizon or in nearby trees, but they all avoided us.

It grew hotter as the sun got higher in the sky, and Rig's face turned pink behind his dumb leather mask. I wanted to tease him for it, but it felt awkward with the silent beastie right behind us.

Eventually though, when I realised we were just over an hour from camp, I had to speak up. "We need to make some semblance of a plan," I said to Rig, my voice hoarse from my dry throat, and sounding loud in the still quiet of the Wastes, despite the fact that I tended to speak pretty quietly. "We can't just turn up at camp with an injured beastie in our trailer."

Rig's brown eyes cut back to the beastie, looking a little concerned. "I guess. But it's not like we haven't helped injured beasties before."

"Yeah, small ones," I hissed, stepping closer to Rig and lowering my voice even more. "Cute little ones that didn't have"—I glanced back—"giant wings and talons."

"We don't discriminate," Rig said stubbornly, brows pulled into a determined expression above his mask. I wanted to roll my eyes. He was so naïve sometimes. "Cat wouldn't turn away someone who was injured, whether it was a beastie or a human. We just need to remind Anchor of that."

The mention of our missing camp leader made me remember what my main purpose for going to the base had been, aside from scavenging. Anchor had wanted me to look for anything that could lead us to where Cat was.

In the six months since he'd vanished, I'd been scouting further out than I ever had before, spying on other raider camps, trying to find any hint or mention of him. Cat stood out—he wasn't forgettable, one to blend into any group easily, like I was. He was tall and imposing, with chiselled features and dark, dark eyes that looked too far inside you when he focused on you.

But despite all that, I'd found nothing. Heard nothing. Seen nothing. It was like he'd vanished off the face of the earth.

My biggest fear was that he'd been eaten by a beastie, but I'd never voiced it to Anchor. I wasn't sure she'd be able to handle hearing it. They weren't a couple, as far as I was aware. More like siblings. Or maybe even a mother-son dynamic, even though I didn't think Anchor was that much older than Cat. I just knew that they'd found each other out here when they'd been teenagers.

I hadn't had a chance to search the base for anything that could have led us to Cat. Not that I thought I would have found anything, anyway. Anchor's determination to find him had grown into an obsession beyond reason, but I was too scared to tell her that there was absolutely no point in still looking for him. That he was long gone. I didn't want to deal with the anger or blame or despair that was likely to follow when she did finally admit that to herself.

I started worrying about what I'd tell Anchor when we got back to camp. She'd be annoyed I hadn't looked for clues for Cat at the base. She'd probably tell me to go back, and I'd probably be doing it alone next time—Rig didn't seem all that eager to repeat this little outing.

First, though, we had to convince her to let us bring the beastie into the camp so that Apollo, our medic, could hopefully fix their leg. The wing was a lost cause, I was pretty sure, and not something a person trained to deal with human injuries would know how to handle, anyway.

I came to a halt, making Rig stop beside me. I saw the beastie's head turn a little to look back at us. They'd been utterly silent for the entire journey, bar some gasps of pain when the ground got rocky and bumpy under the trailer's wheels.

My gut clenched when I caught a glimpse of big, mournful black eyes, and I turned back around quickly. "One of us can go ahead to explain the situation to Anchor," I said to Rig. "The other can stay here with…" I flushed, realising I had no name for the beastie and didn't want to just call them a monster. "The other can stay here with the gun. We're not all that far from the camp, so it won't take long. And this area's pretty safe. I come through here a lot, and never see anything. The Wastes seem pretty quiet today."

Rig nodded, but he still looked around warily. "Okay. Um, so, do you want to wait here or go ahead to camp?"

I hesitated, because I didn't like the thought of leaving Rig out in the Wastes, but… "I'm quicker," I told him. "And I could run it with my eyes closed. You might get lost."

Rig nodded again. Even though his eyes were tense and nervous, he smiled at me from behind his mask. "You're right. And I'm not going to argue if you want to *actually* run the whole way. Whatever makes you get back sooner."

I smiled and clapped Rig on the shoulder. "You'll be fine," I said, but I couldn't help the thread of worry that wound its way through my gut at the thought of Rig being out here, so vulnerable. Maybe I *would* run as far as I could.

I pointed at a nearby copse of trees. "Let's set you up over there, where there's some shelter from the sun. Your forehead's getting sunburnt," I added, mainly to distract him.

It worked. Rig's vanity flared. "What?" He clapped a gloved hand to his forehead. "I don't want sun spots. Do you know the sun is the biggest cause of aging skin? And it's not like we have any good skincare out here. It's not like we have *any* skincare out here."

"Mhmm." We stopped the trailer under the trees, and I made sure the beastie was out of the sun too before I adjusted the straps of my backpack and pulled Rig into a brief hug. "I'll be quick. Stay alert. Have your gun ready."

"Be safe," Rig replied, squeezing the nape of my neck before we parted, stepping back.

I glanced at the beastie one last time and noticed them watching me through their hair. My face flared with heat for some stupid, needless reason and I looked away again, nodding at Rig as I started walking without another word.

"Be safe!" he called again, and I could feel him watching me as I started heading in the direction of camp. It felt wrong, so wrong, to leave Rig out there.

I had an intense flare of worry, so strong it made my gut hurt. Were we being total morons? Was I doing the wrong thing, risking Rig by leaving him to try and help a beastie we didn't know?

I just had to hope that this wasn't going to backfire on us.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Our camp was a big, ugly blot on the wild and open landscape, toward the north-east of the state, close to the South Dakota state line. We sat inside the Dissected Till Plains, which meant fertile soil, and were close to the Niobrara River, which meant plenty of water we could boil to make safe.

It was an ideal spot, which was surely what had made Cat and Anchor set up camp here all those years ago, before the military base had been built nearby. Even though at surface level it seemed like having the military so close wasn't ideal, it had actually turned out to be a boon. We kept to ourselves and didn't get in their way. In turn, they had—so far—left us alone and mostly deterred other raiders and beasties from the area.

One thing I'd never been sure of, though? How the hell two teenagers had managed to locate and stack a shit load of shipping containers, old trucks, and other huge pieces of scrap to form the perimeter of their newly established camp, which had formerly been a big roadside motel, diner and bar.

When I'd asked Cat a few years ago, he'd just laughed and brushed off the question.

But seriously. How?

The perimeter of our camp was a big, looming wall of metal as I approached. Most of the containers were rusted, their logos faded from years of weather, but some still bore the signs of life before the monsters.

The camp had originally been open to the sky, but Rig spent his first few years here creating a 'roof' of sorts by soldering together any and all of the chicken wire we came across out in the Wastes. There didn't seem to be many flying beasties around here, but at least we had some form of protection from above. It meant that the sunlight was dappled through the wire inside the entire camp, but I kind of liked it.

I could see a raider sitting on the top of the highest container above me, leaning back on one hand, keeping watch. They raised the other hand to wave down at me, and I waved back briefly.

There were two ways into the camp. The main entrance, and one that was never used but existed in case we ever needed to escape and the front

door was blocked, so to speak. The military may have left us alone so far, but that didn't mean we weren't wary of them.

The main entrance was hidden and impossible to spot if you didn't know where to look. Rig and I had spent a long time creating the maze through the shipping containers that led into the camp. Any raiders who had to leave grumbled at us all the time, but it was worth it.

An indiscernible door had been sheared out of the side of one of the containers and reinforced on the interior with load-bearing steel joists. It sat in a narrow strip between two containers, tucked out of sight from anyone who may have been watching from a distance.

I slipped inside and exhaled, relieved to be back within the camp's perimeter. The air in the shipping containers was hot and dry, smelling faintly of metal and rust, as familiar to me as my own room.

I started worrying again about what I'd tell Anchor as I made my way through, muscle memory kicking in and letting me zone out as I walked. When I made my way out the other side and into the camp proper, there weren't many people around. There were twenty of us here, and we all had jobs to do during the day. Keeping watch on the camp wall, tending to the plants, collecting water from the nearby river, hunting. There was always something that needed doing.

I made a beeline for the diner, which acted kind of like our longhouse or meeting place—where we got our food, held meetings or socialised; not that I did much of the latter. It sat at the far end of the camp, our metal perimeter looming up behind it and casting a long shadow over the squat building. I knew it would be where I'd find Anchor.

Our resident cooks, Bo and Daisy, both glanced up through the window hatch from the kitchen as I stepped inside. As one, they nodded at me and returned to whatever they were doing, no doubt chopping vegetables for tonight's stew. We ate a lot of stew, because it stretched far. Bo had even joked about bringing back the medieval practice of making a perpetual stew, where whatever was on hand was thrown in and the pot was never emptied all the way or cleaned out.

He'd been outvoted.

"How was it?" Anchor asked the moment I stepped into the dim interior of the diner. She abandoned the clipboard she'd been using to take inventory of our food supplies and pulled the pen she'd been chewing on out of her mouth as she walked over to me.

I scratched the back of my neck with a gloved hand. “Well, uh…”

“Did you find any sign of Cat?” she murmured after stopping in front of me, folding rangy arms over her chest. Dark, steady eyes watched me over her green mask. “Any sign he’d been held there?”

I shook my head. “No, but we didn’t get much time to look around.” I hesitated. “We… found a beastie.”

A thick, dark brow rose. “Okay…”

I realised how that sounded. Not like it wasn’t common to come across beasties in the Wastes. “I mean, we found a beastie that the military had been holding there. Still bound.”

When Anchor continued to stare at me, making me want to squirm, I continued. “We uh… kind of… helped them.” I cleared my throat. “*Andbroughtthembackwithus*,” I added in a rush.

Anchor continued gazing at me for a moment, black brows furrowed, before her expression cleared as she processed my words. “You… *what*?”

“We haven’t brought them into the camp,” I said quickly. “I came ahead to speak to you and ask what you wanted to do. Rig’s with them a way back.”

“I don’t… what?” Anchor spluttered, uncrossing her arms to reach up and shove a hand through her thick, curly dark hair. “You left Rig out in the Wastes with a *beastie?*”

“That should tell you how little of a threat they are,” I said immediately. “You know I’d never risk Rig.”

I took a step closer and lowered my voice. “Look, Anchor, they’re really —in really bad shape. And they seem to be… super scared. Freaked out. We had to camp out in the Wastes last night and they… they actually protected us from another beastie. I don’t think they’re a threat.”

“Be that as it may, that doesn’t mean I can just… let them come in here!” Anchor shook her head incredulously. “What the hell, Ghost? I maybe could have expected this from Rig. He’s too impulsive and soft-hearted. But *you’re* even more cautious than *me*.”

I flushed beneath my mask. “Yeah, I know.” My voice was rough. “And I’m sorry, Anchor. I know it was stupid. But we… we couldn’t have just left them there. The military messed them up. And their leg… They need help.”

“Ffffuuuck.” Anchor exhaled loudly and scrubbed light brown hands with knobbly knuckles roughly over her face, tugging briefly at the skin of

her cheeks above her mask. “And you think the rest of the camp’s just gonna let you boys waltz in here with a beastie, huh?”

“Seriously, when you see them, you’ll understand.” I shook my head, thinking of the monster’s timid, dazed state. How catatonic they’d been all night. “They’re not a threat.” I prayed to god they didn’t make a liar out of me.

There was a long moment of silence, broken only by the gentle sounds of Bo and Daisy chopping vegetables through the hatch into the kitchen.

“Come on, Anchor,” I said eventually. “You know Cat would have wanted us to help. You know we’re not assholes here. If someone needs our help—human *or* beastie—we help. Right?”

We’d helped injured beasties before, but they’d all been pretty small—more like wild animals than the humanoid, intelligent kind. I wasn’t about to remind Anchor of that, though.

Anchor cursed again. “Alright, alright. Manipulative asshole.” Dark eyes glared at me. “What does this beastie look like? Any deadly appendages? Giant fangs?”

I thought of the beastie’s broken leg and shredded wing. “Um… Bird-like feet. Huge wings that look kind of like bat wings, but the right one is a mess.”

Something sparked in Anchor’s eyes. “Are they tall? What colour is their skin?” Her voice sounded odd.

“Um, yeah. And super pale. Their veins look… black.” When she didn’t say anything, I tried to think of any other details I could share without sounding weird. My stomach lurched with pleasant nerves at the thought of the beastie’s beautiful, strange face. “And they… their eyes are… They have huge black irises—you can hardly see the whites.”

I heard Anchor exhale softly. “Yeah. Okay.” She shook her head, dark curls moving, and wiped the back of her wrist over her forehead. “Okay, you can bring them.”

I cocked my head as I watched her, noticing how strange she was acting. “Do you know them or something?” I asked, half-joking.

I blinked when Anchor nodded.

“Huh?” I said dumbly.

She exhaled. “I think so. Kind of. More like Cat… It’s a long story.” She shook her head. “But you can bring them. If anyone gives you shit, tell them to come talk to me.”

I blinked again, taking a second to process her words. Anchor's eyes hardened as she looked at me. "You watch them, alright? Eyes on them the *entire* time. And get Lilac," she added, voice grim. "Tell him to be ready to take them down if they do *anything* that threatens this camp."

"No problem," I said quickly. "I'll go get him. So… we can bring them here? Get Apollo to see them?"

Anchor exhaled noisily and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Go before I change my mind. And you're going back to that base to look for *anything* that might help us find Cat. Think of it as your payment for me letting you bring in the strays you find out there."

"Of course, sure." I was already backing out of the diner. "Thanks, Anchor."

I stepped back out into the bright sunlight and hurried across the camp, ignoring the few raiders milling around except for the lone figure I spotted in the shadow of the camp wall.

Lilac glanced up from the little figurine he was whittling as I approached, bright green eyes as blank as ever over his black mask.

"I'm gonna need you," I told him. "Don't move. I'll be back in about an hour."

The only indication that he'd heard and acknowledged my words was a tiny quirk of his right brow before he looked back down at his work, carefully carving something intricate out of the lump of wood, the strokes of his short knife sure and somehow delicate.

I didn't stop to look any closer or say anything else to Lilac, who was even less of a talker than I usually was. Instead, I slipped past him and started making my way back through the maze within the containers that led out to the Wastes beyond the perimeter.

When I reached Rig and the monster a while later, they were just as I left them. Which meant Rig was talking aimlessly about nothing just to fill the silence, while the monster stared out at the horizon with big, black eyes.

"We're good," I told Rig, who eagerly started shoving the bits of scrap he'd been messing around with back in his duffle.

"Sweet. You hear that, buddy? We'll get that leg fixed up real soon." Rig slung his duffle onto the trailer and jerked his chin toward the monster. The sight of their leg, bent halfway down the shin at almost a right angle, wasn't any less jarring than it had been the day before.

I made my way to the front of the trailer the beastie sat on and grabbed one side of the handle, waiting for Rig. He took hold of the handle moments later, our gloved hands brushing, and started pulling with a grunt, eager to get back to the camp.

“Shit, I’m starving,” he said as we strained to drag the trailer. I rolled my eyes but said nothing. Rig rarely travelled outside of the camp, but he’d been eager to see what tech he could find for himself in the military base, so he'd come with me.

I didn’t think he’d be wanting a repeat anytime soon.

“Don’t get how you do this all the time, man,” he grumbled, reinforcing my thought. “I’m desperate for a shower. And coffee.”

“We haven’t had coffee for months,” I deadpanned. There were a few nomads—trusted ones—that we traded with when they came our way, but none of them had been able to pick up any coffee from their last few *discreet* visits into the coastal cities.

Rig groaned. “I’m being optimistic. Don’t kill my buzz. Maybe one of the traders showed up while we were gone.”

My lips quirked behind my mask. “We’ve been gone a day.”

Rig reached over and got me in a loose headlock. “God, you’re such a downer, Ghost. You want the window latch in your room fixed? Then let me live in my caffeine-fuelled fantasy for a little longer.”

I slipped out of his hold and shoved half-heartedly at his arm. “Dork.”

“Seriously, though, I don’t get how you do this all the time.” Rig shook his head, brown eyes cutting over to me briefly above his studded leather mask. “Especially alone. Last night was…” He shuddered.

I shrugged, a little uncomfortable. It wasn’t like I loved being out in the Wastes alone. Sleeping out in the open at night, trying to find hidden spaces where roaming beasties wouldn’t stumble across me. Snapping to attention at every tiny sound nearby, my heart pounding like a drum in my throat. I’d been nearly caught more times than I could count, but I didn’t bother telling Anchor or Rig when it happened anymore. Wasn’t like they could do anything about it.

Guess I was just lucky that I was quick and had a lot of stamina when it came to running for my life.

“Even the time you were gone speaking to Anchor was horrible, and I had a beastie to keep me safe.” Rig raised his voice a little to call back to the silent monster on the trailer. “Isn’t that right, buddy?”

I resisted the urge to peek back at them, knowing my attention, for some reason, made them very uncomfortable. There was no answer to Rig's rhetorical question, anyway.

It wasn't long before we were arriving back at the camp. Even though I'd fought for the monster to come here and get seen by our medic, I started to sweat with nerves as we approached the perimeter. I saw the raider keeping guard up top scramble to their feet. I quickly shot them a thumbs up to indicate everything was fine—to not worry about the unnerving beastie with gigantic black wings that we were bringing into a camp full of humans.

Maybe this had been a really, *really* dumb idea.

I glanced nervously at Rig, but he didn't seem fazed. In fact, I could tell that he was grinning behind his mask, no doubt already anticipating getting back to his room, out of the sun, and lighting up one of his hand-rolled cigarettes so he could start sifting through the junk he'd collected in peace. That was Rig's idea of heaven.

I looked back at the monster, still silently hunched over in the trailer. Their huge wings were a crumpled heap that was surely uncomfortable, the tips dragging over the grass. They still appeared docile. Helpless. But was it all an act?

We tried not to be assholes in our camp. Tried not to assume that monster automatically equalled evil, or mindless, or bloodthirsty. Truthfully, humans could be worse. Our missing co-leader Cat had always spurned inherent hostility toward beasties. I didn't want to sully his memory now by turning away this one, who so clearly needed help.

That didn't mean I wasn't nervous. I licked my lips behind my mask, stomach jittery as we reached the gap between the containers. Rig and I helped the beastie up out of the trailer. Being the taller and stronger one out of us both, Rig helped them to the hidden door while I dragged the trailer behind them.

Luckily, no one approached us as we helped the beastie across the camp to the room that belonged to Apollo, our medic. Lilac was no longer whittling in the shade of the shipping containers, but leaning against the side of the motel building, arms folded over his chest, watching us silently with green eyes that were piercing in the sunlight.

After depositing Rig and the beastie at Apollo's door, I hurried back over to Lilac. He was still watching the beastie, face expressionless as

always. Sometimes I wondered if Lilac even felt emotions at all.

"Hey." I stopped in front of him.

It took a long moment for Lilac to tear his eyes away from the monster and look back at me, but he didn't comment on the very abnormal sight of a big, winged beastie within the camp walls.

"Hey." He gestured toward my room, at the very far end of the building, with a little tilt of his head. "Want to check on them?"

I perked up at that, nodding immediately. "How have my girls been?" I asked as we started to walk toward my room.

Lilac's piercing green eyes remained steady above his black mask, even though I got the distinct impression that, internally, he was rolling them. "Fine," he said shortly.

I fidgeted nervously with my hands, picking up my pace. "Are you sure? Trixie was skittish when I left. She'd been spooked by something in the night, I think. Did she—?"

"They're all fine, Ghost." Lilac's voice was as flat as ever.

I huffed in response, cutting around the side of the building to my little yard out back. Those of us who'd wanted an outside space had fenced off little areas between the motel and the camp wall. Lilac followed silently, handing me the key to the padlock on the gate. I opened it up swiftly. I could hear the girls shuffling around the yard, clucking softly, and a smile curved my lips beneath my mask. It felt like the first in days.

Sasha was the first to notice me, but only because she was pecking at the ground closest to us when we stepped into the yard. Her beady little eyes took us in for a moment before she went back to scratching at the dusty ground.

I stopped and counted as Ginger moseyed closer to me, welcoming me home. She was always the most affectionate, allowing me to bend down and stroke her feathers briefly. She clucked at me once before crouching low to start giving herself a dust bath.

I could only count seven. "Where's Trixie?" I asked, just a hint of panic making its way into my voice.

"She's fine," Lilac said behind me. "Still in the coop. Didn't want to come out this morning."

I grunted. "I told you she got spooked by something."

I strode toward the coop tucked into the corner of the yard. Bianca squawked and scurried out of my way with an indignant flap of her wings.

“Maybe I should reinforce the bottom of the fence? In case something is trying to get in at night.”

“Ghost, they’re *fine*.” Lilac sounded a touch exasperated by my worrying. “The fence is secure. And if the perimeter can keep monsters out, I’m pretty sure it can keep out whatever else might be eyeing up your chickens.”

I squatted down and peered into the hot, dry depths of the coop, blinking a few times as my eyes adjusted from the bright sun. Beady black eyes blinked at me from the back of the musty space.

“Hey, girl,” I cooed, trying to look Trixie over. She seemed fine, and she did occasionally have a lazy day in the coop, but still…

“Did she lay this morning?” I asked Lilac, peering over my shoulder at him.

Our camp’s resident killer stood behind me, a dark outline against the dappled sunlight. His arms were folded over his chest, brows pulled low over his green eyes in an impatient expression above his black mask. His dark hair was pulled up into his signature high ponytail, long strands moving in the light breeze.

“Yes, she did. All of them did,” he told me.

I exhaled and gave Trixie one final look before standing back up, my knee cracking on the way. “Okay.”

It wasn’t that I didn’t trust Lilac to look after them. In fact, he was the only other raider in this whole damn camp that I *did* trust with the girls, seeing as he was the one here with the patience and care to oversee our crops and grow all those plants he kept in his room. Well, except for Rig’s damn tobacco plants.

But Lilac had a nurturing side, despite the fact that he was the one in our camp who Anchor sent out to ‘dispatch’ any monsters or raiders who attacked or threatened us. He always took good care of the girls, and as much as he liked to pretend it was an inconvenience, I knew he was fond of them.

“Thanks for looking after them while I was gone,” I told him. He grunted in response.

After a moment of silence broken only by the gentle clucking of the hens around us, he said, “So you brought a monster back with you.”

I tensed. “Yeah. We found them at the base. They were chained up, so we… set them free.”

Lilac grunted. “Guessing I’m expected to be available in case it starts getting ugly.”

I cleared my throat. “Anchor may have mentioned making sure you stayed close by while they’re here.”

Lilac let out a humourless huff. “Yeah.” He exhaled. “Sure. I’ll keep an eye on them. Did they seem likely to get violent?”

“No,” I answered straight away. “If anything, they seem scared of *us*.”

“Hm.” Lilac didn’t sound convinced. “We’ll see.”

“Rig took them to see Apollo,” I told him. “They’re pretty badly injured. We should go over.”

In response, Lilac silently stepped to the side and gestured for me to start walking. He probably thought I didn’t notice when he quickly bent down and petted Ginger as we headed out of the yard, but I did. I noticed everything.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Apollo's room was at the other end of the long, double-storey block that had once been a big motel. I could already see Rig leaning against the wall between Apollo's door and window, his booted foot tapping nervously against the brick, arms folded over his chest.

He straightened up when we approached. "Hey," he said to Lilac, who nodded back silently. Rig's soft brown eyes turned to me, tense and worried. "You think they're okay in there? Should I have gone in with Apollo? I wanted to give them some privacy. You know, doctor-patient confidentiality and stuff? I didn't—"

"I'm sure it's fine." I grasped Rig's shoulder briefly. "You'd have heard if Apollo needed you."

A frisson of worry still shot through my gut at the thought of our medic alone in there with a beastie. What if they freaked out when he went to touch them, to assess their injuries?

I didn't say any of that to Rig, though. Instead, I tilted my head to Lilac. "Anchor wants Lilac to keep an eye on them while they're here."

Rig nodded distractedly and started to say something when the door beside him opened, silencing him. Apollo stepped outside, his usually tanned skin a little pale behind his medical mask. He blinked, then nodded in greeting at Lilac and me.

"An update on our new winged friend." Apollo's brown eyes were tight and serious. "Firstly, he indicated he identifies as male when I gave him options. It was a nod—he still won't speak."

"He can," Rig noted, voice sad, "but I think he's… in shock or something?"

Apollo nodded. "He's definitely in shock. Dazed and traumatised." He exhaled and reached up to run fingers through his blond hair, pulling a few strands loose from its messy bun. "He let me take off his coat and shirt to check him over. He's got… a lot of scars. Including a brand on his left shoulder blade. *001*."

"Zero-zero-one?" I felt sick at the thought of anyone being branded. "Does that… Do you think that means he was the first beastie they held there?"

“I’d say that’s a pretty good guess.” Apollo gripped his hips with restless hands. “I said I’d call him One until he was comfortable enough to tell us his real name, somehow. If he won’t speak, I don’t know if he’ll be able to write anything for a while. His arms are… not good.”

“What about his leg?” I asked, stomach clenching at the thought of the unnatural angle his leg had been bent at.

Apollo’s eyes tightened, and I knew his lips were set in a grim line behind his medical mask. “The bone has kind of set, but very poorly. I think he heals quick, but the broken ends haven’t really… knitted back together properly. It’s clearly causing him a lot of pain. I don’t know if a nerve is trapped or what, but…”

He exhaled. “If I want to fix it, I’m going to have to break what *has* knitted back together. It flexes more than a tibia *ever* should, so I think I’ll be able to do it with my limited resources here.”

Apollo was a damn good medic, but it wasn’t like we were in possession of top-notch equipment out here. He’d trained as a paramedic in one of the cities on the west coast before making his way into the Wastes, wanting to use his skills to help raiders out here.

“Shit.” Rig turned to face me, face pale above his leather mask. “Poor guy.”

“Is he going to… react well to that? Has he indicated he wants it fixed?” I asked Apollo, worry already flooding through me.

One seemed gentle, even timid, but… he was still a monster. We had no idea if he’d snap and start attacking if we broke his leg to fix it—if he was even in a real position to understand we’d be helping him. Especially when, evidently, all he’d experienced from humans so far was the sadistic pain and suffering they had inflicted on him in that military base.

“I explained it to him,” Apollo said. “He nodded. I asked him if he definitely understood what it meant—what I’d have to do. He nodded.”

Our medic shrugged helplessly. “I can ask again, but if he won’t speak to give his consent verbally… I guess we have to trust he understands by his non-verbal cues?”

“He responded well to Rig,” I said, unable to keep the faint thread of bitterness out of my voice, even as it made my cheeks heat behind my gas mask. I still didn’t get why he’d taken to Rig and not me. “Maybe Rig can go and talk to him—make sure he fully understands what you need to do.”

“Worth a shot.” Apollo turned to open the door.

“You coming too?” Rig asked me.

After a brief hesitation, I nodded. I did want to see One. Make sure he was okay. But if I started making him as uncomfortable as I had before, I’d leave.

Apollo’s room was like the rest of ours, decent in size yet still somehow cramped. Dim and perpetually hot in the summer. The only difference with Apollo’s room was that it led directly to our medical office, set behind a locked door that only Apollo and Anchor had keys to. We all trusted each other here, but that trust only extended so far.

When Apollo opened the door, my eyes immediately flew to the long body stretched out on the gurney, wings hanging limply off the sides, so big they dragged and took up half the floor space. One’s long fingers were folded together over his middle, head turned away from us. He looked almost… serene. Or at least, he would, if his left leg wasn’t sticking out at a sickening angle, and his right wing wasn’t a shredded mess. Surely it wasn’t comfortable to lie on his wings like that, either.

I hung back by the door, shifting awkwardly on my feet. Lilac positioned himself silently in the corner of the room, leaning against the wall. But despite his relaxed posture, his eyes were as sharp as ever as they stayed fixed on One. I could see his right hand resting beside the machete at his waist.

“Hey, One.” Rig’s voice was low and friendly as he stepped up to the gurney, avoiding standing on the wings, and patted the monster’s arm.

At the sound of Rig’s voice, One’s head moved and he turned pitch-black eyes toward him. My chest tightened when I saw burn scars down the right side of his face, as his dark hair fell back onto the metal surface under him.

The skin on his cheekbone and curving around his eye socket was raised and discoloured. It looked tight and twisted, and I could see it extending to his ear, the curve of which was misshapen, and down past his jaw to the side of his throat.

It was healed, but heavily scarred. I remembered noticing the remnants of a fire at the military base. My stomach tightened at the thought of One having to endure that. Was he still trapped in his cell when the fire broke out? Did he have to walk through it to get to the upper levels of the building?

“We want to fix your leg,” Rig was saying, and One was gazing up at him with big, liquid eyes. “But to do that, Apollo is going to have to break it. It’s going to hurt. Are you *sure* you want us to do it?”

One nodded.

“Are you…” Rig cleared his throat, and I saw the back of his neck get red. “I don’t mean to be a dick, but is there a chance you might, like… snap and start attacking when we do it?”

One’s dark brows pulled down immediately and he shook his head. I saw a pale, long-fingered hand lift off his stomach. It trembled wildly, like the nerves still hadn’t recovered from being freed from their bound state. He hesitated for a moment, before placing it on Rig’s forearm.

Something sharp and petty pierced me at the sight, and I blinked and looked away. *Pathetic*, I thought to myself, wanting to shift my feet as nervous energy filled me up.

“Okay,” Rig said softly, patting the back of One’s hand before looking over at Apollo and nodding. Then he glanced back at me and quirked a brow. “Hey, Ghost is here too. He wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

When Rig jerked his chin at me in an overly obvious, *get over here* gesture, I swallowed and took a tentative step closer to the gurney.

One’s big, dark eyes swung to me immediately, then away again just as fast.

Feeling painfully uncomfortable, especially with Apollo and Lilac watching this humiliating display, I crossed the distance to the gurney with quick steps, wanting to get this over with. My face was hot, skin getting damp where the edges of my mask pushed in.

“Uh, hey.” My voice was raspy with nerves. I cleared my throat. “Glad you’re… um… I’m glad we can help you. Sorry for…”

I trailed off, feeling even more anxious when Rig shot me an alarmed look. “Sorry for what they did to you in there,” I finished weakly, hoping the mention of it didn’t trigger anything for him.

One’s head had twitched when I’d started speaking, but I noticed his shoulders relax onto the gurney. He still wouldn’t look at me, but at least he wasn’t stiff with fear at the sight of me anymore. Progress, I guess.

Evidently, I was still making him somewhat uncomfortable though, so I cleared my throat and had a brief, silent conversation with Rig. We’d perfected the art of saying all manner of things to each other with just our eyes.

And right now, I could see Rig calling me a shithead if I left.

Oh, well. He'd get over it.

"I'll—I better go, but I'll come check on you later," I said, not sure if I meant it. Did One even want me anywhere near him? It sure didn't seem it.

Not waiting for anyone else to speak, I turned and nodded once at Apollo, who had thankfully stopped watching and was by the sink scrubbing his hands. Still leaning silently against the wall with his arms folded over his chest, Lilac met my eyes briefly before returning them to One.

"Wait."

I rolled my eyes at Rig's voice, but stopped.

A gloved hand gripped my shoulder, and I felt the press of Rig's body against my side. "He reached for you," he murmured low, so only I could hear.

My face contorted. "What?"

"When you turned, he reached for you. He doesn't want you to leave. I think he's scared. Will you just stay while Apollo does this?" Rig glanced back at One. "He's in shock and freaked out and terrified. Come on."

He reached for me?

What the hell? I blinked, staring at a scuff mark on the white wall beside the door. "But he seems really uncomfortable around me," I said blankly, not understanding.

Rig shrugged. "I don't know, man. He's a beastie—who knows how he reacts to stuff? I'm just saying, I don't think he wants you to go."

My stomach dipped with pleasant nerves at Rig's words. My throat bobbing as I swallowed, I nodded once. "Fine."

One was staring at us when we turned back. Even though he couldn't see my mouth, I shot him a small, nervous smile as we walked back to the gurney. One blinked, gazing at me, before those dark eyes cut away from my face yet again. My smile turned into a confused frown.

"We're going to stay with you while Apollo does this," Rig told him, moving to stand around the other side of the gurney, so we were facing each other on either side of One.

When Apollo moved to the foot of the gurney with his supplies, eyeing that messed up leg with a look of grim determination, I oh-so-casually placed my gloved hands on the cold metal surface, a few inches from One's

arm. A glance up at Rig conveyed my intention. *Get ready to hold his arms down.* I saw Rig give me a tiny nod and do the same a few moments later.

I had no idea if we'd even be able to hold One down—it wasn't like we knew how strong he was, considering he was *seven hundred years old*—but we were the ones who'd found him. We were the ones who'd brought him here, to the camp. So that meant it was our responsibility to try and minimise the risk to Apollo, and all the other raiders here.

I glanced over at Lilac and noticed he'd already unsheathed his machete and was holding it by his side in a loose, casual grip. He still looked totally at ease. Relaxed. He did this far too often—having to potentially kill things—to feel the swirl of nerves that were causing a storm in my belly. His eyes were laser-focused on One, and I knew he'd react quicker than any of us could if One *did* snap and start attacking.

"Okay." I detected only the faintest hint of nerves in Apollo's voice. "Are we, uh… all ready?"

Agonising silence followed. I looked down, my stomach clenching when I saw that One was trembling, long fingers gripping the sides of the metal gurney, dark eyes somehow bright with fear.

I shot Rig a panicked glance and saw him already looking at me. He widened his eyes meaningfully and jerked his chin down at One. When I stared back at him dumbly, not doing anything, he did it again more forcefully.

For god's sake.

"So, um…" My voice trembled with nerves. I had no idea what to say, I just knew that Rig wasn't going to stop gesturing at me to speak until I did. "Once Apollo's fixed your leg, we can find you somewhere to rest. You can take a shower. Maybe eat something. Um, do you eat? I don't…"

I shrugged helplessly at Rig, but he gestured emphatically for me to continue. When I looked back down, I did notice that One's body appeared less tense. His breathing had slowed just a fraction, even though Apollo was pulling on disposable gloves and getting what looked like a splint ready at the foot of the gurney.

"I know some beasties don't need to eat. I'm guessing you don't, seeing as you were… um…" I needed to try and stay away from mentioning the military or his captivity. "But we can see if there's something you want."

Apollo's hands reached for One's leg. One's breathing sped back up, black eyes staring up at the ceiling, wide and unblinking. His chest heaved.

“We have books,” I blurted, heart thumping, fingers twitching, ready to move and grab at One’s arm if he lashed out at Apollo. “Another raider, Cat, before he went missing, he liked to read. His room’s the same, hasn’t been touched, so there’s—We can get you books if you—”

The sickening crack of One’s tibia cut me off, making bile push at the back of my throat. One didn’t make a sound aside from a sharp, shuddering exhalation, but his pale skin was gleaming with sweat. When I glanced further down the table, I felt the blood drain from my face.

Under One’s fingers, the sides of the gurney were warped upwards, like tiny wings. He’d literally bent the thick metal with his hands.

Rig and I shared an alarmed look over One’s prone form, but neither of us spoke.

“You’re doing great, One.” Apollo’s voice was grim as he bound One’s leg to the makeshift splint.

I’d been lucky enough to not break any bones while out in the Wastes, and I’d never been more grateful for that fact as I watched our medic use the best tools at his disposal—rudimentary at most—to treat One. It threw into sharp relief just how vulnerable we were out here. A simple infection, one that could have been quickly cleared up with antibiotics before the monsters rose, could kill one of us in the Wastes.

Did monsters get infections? Was One at risk of anything?

“Okay.” Apollo’s forehead had a sheen of sweat on it as he finished binding One’s leg. “Hopefully this helps and doesn’t make anything worse. I’m hoping your… supernatural genetic make-up lets this heal cleanly.”

He patted One’s good leg. “You did great, chief.”

I was still reeling over the fact that One hadn’t made a single sound while Apollo *broke his leg*. Without any form of anaesthetic or pain relief. Did he feel pain? He’d seemed to, in the car on the way here. My stomach twisted at the thought that maybe he was just used to it. To pain. From humans.

One let out another shaky breath, and as Rig and I looked down at him, his eyes darted to me, and we stared at each other for a split-second that felt a million times longer. This close, I noticed that his irises weren’t just solid black, but decorated with swirling pinpricks of faint colour. Like galaxies.

A sharp knock broke the moment, making me blink and look up at the door. Before I tore my eyes from One’s though, I noticed something almost like a faint glow flare within them as he jumped at the sudden noise.

“It’s me.” Anchor’s raspy voice came from behind the closed door.

Apollo looked at One with a frown. “It’s getting crowded in here. Want me to kick everyone out so Anchor can come speak to you?”

One shook his head immediately, and his eyes darted back over to me again before he looked at Rig.

Apollo exhaled and nodded. “Okay. Lilac, will you let Anchor in? Ghost, Rig, can you help One sit up?”

That was easier said than done. As Lilac let Anchor into the room, Rig and I got One into an upright position, then awkwardly helped him manoeuvre until he was sitting with his legs hanging over the edge of the gurney and his wings behind him. One hadn’t reacted when we’d carefully moved his damaged wing, so maybe it didn’t hurt him, but it felt lifeless. Limp. Like he couldn’t use it at all now that the membrane between those long, bony fingers had been shredded.

As I stepped back to give One some space, I heard Anchor let out a disbelieving little chuckle. “I’ll be damned,” she said, and I looked over to see her take a hesitant step forward.

I glanced at One. He was staring back at her. Despite the trauma he’d just gone through, his eyes were calm, his features no longer pulled taut.

“Do you remember me?” Anchor asked him.

Rig and I shared a quick glance. We all stayed quiet. Apollo paused in sorting out his supplies to look over with a confused frown. Even Lilac’s normally impassive face twitched with surprise as he settled back into his spot in the corner, leaning one shoulder on the wall, watching intently.

My stomach clenched up when One’s face broke into a true smile, his pale lips stretching, showing even, white teeth. Tiny lines crinkled in the corners of his big eyes next to those spidery black-green markings.

Despite the ashen tone of his skin, he looked almost radiant for a moment. Like he hadn’t felt anything close to happiness or joy for a long time. Like this was the first reason for him to properly smile in a while.

He nodded.

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CHAPTER NINE

Rig was the first to break the silence.

"Huh?" He looked between the two of them. "You've met before?"

Anchor and One continued to watch each other, but there didn't seem to be any bad tension. "Yes," Anchor said. "Back when Cat and I first got to this area." She nodded at One. "He helped us make this camp."

I blinked in shock, then slowly turned my gaze to One. He was sitting calmly on the gurney, back slightly hunched, forearms resting on his thighs as he picked at his thumbnail. Once more, I noticed the slight, protruding bump down the length of his spine under his coat, between his wings, that I'd first clocked back at the military base. I wondered what it was.

"What?" Rig burst out. "How? That's crazy! What are the freaking odds?"

I saw One shoot Rig a small, tentative smile, but he still didn't say anything.

Anchor answered. "This one…"—her eyes crinkled as she shot One a crooked smile behind her mask—"…found two dumbass teenagers wandering the Wastes alone, trying not to get eaten, and took pity on us." Her neck flushed. "Well, it was Cat, mainly. Cat was friendly to everyone who didn't immediately try to kill us, even back then when the sight of any kind of monster sent most people running and screaming. I was a little more, um… hostile."

She sounded awkward, and her dark eyes were sincere when she looked back at One. "I'm sorry I was cold to you when you were just trying to help us. I was just… I was a scared kid."

One still didn't speak, but he shook his head, as if to say '*it doesn't matter*'.

"So, wait." Apollo finished scrubbing his hands at the sink and turned to face us. "One—Wait, do you know his name? He isn't talking. Which is fine," he added quickly, smiling at One.

Anchor shook her head, looking shamefaced again. "No. Sorry. It was Cat who—" Her neck flushed deeper. "I didn't talk to him much. I was kind of an asshole, to be honest."

She looked at One again. "I really am sorry."

“Okay, so One found you and Cat wandering around the Wastes with no plan,” Apollo said, putting his hands on his hips. “And you said he helped you make the camp…?”

“An abandoned shipping barge had drifted from the Missouri River and gotten stuck in the shallows,” Anchor explained. “He brought the containers here for us to make our camp wall.”

Apollo made a small sound. “So he… built the camp’s perimeter on his own?” He looked at One with wide eyes. “You… you *carried* shipping containers from the Missouri River?”

“The barge had run aground at the mouth of the Niobrara, so it wasn’t all that far,” Anchor clarified.

“I mean, still.” Apollo looked flabbergasted. “That’s… that’s insane.”

His wide brown eyes drifted to the twisted metal on the sides of his gurney. There was an imprint of One’s fingers bent into the surface. I saw Apollo’s Adam’s apple bob below his mask as he swallowed.

I suddenly wondered why, if One was strong enough to carry freaking shipping containers on his own, he hadn’t gotten himself out of those chains at the military base? Surely, he was strong enough to have gotten out of any cell the military had put him in.

Why hadn’t he?

“Wow. Well, what a small world, huh?” Rig went to clap One on the shoulder and stopped himself, looking unsure of how the beastie would react.

One seemed calmer now, at least. More at ease, even though there were currently five raiders crowding this small room with him—one of whom was still casually holding a machete and watching him closely. Maybe seeing a familiar face in Anchor had settled his nerves. Or maybe we just weren’t a threat to him, even five against one. Even with a broken, splinted leg.

The thought was just a bit unsettling.

“So, we better find somewhere for you to rest, huh?” Anchor said to One, her dark eyes tired as she reached up and shoved her curly hair back from her face. She looked like a person who was nearing the limit. She’d been stressed for months, running the camp alone and worrying about Cat. Refusing to acknowledge the fact that he was probably dead. She was in limbo, just waiting for him to come back.

I was almost positive he was never coming back.

“What about Cat’s room?” I offered hesitantly. “It’s got all those books One can read while he—”

“No,” Anchor barked, and I noticed One flinch almost imperceptibly out of the corner of my eye.

Anchor cleared her throat, looking embarrassed above her mask. “No,” she repeated in a calmer voice. “We have other rooms. We can get books from Cat’s room if One wants to read while he heals up.”

“Okay.” I said quickly. “Rig and I can help One to an empty room.”

Rig nodded. “We’ll pick one close to our rooms in case you need anything. Okay?” he said to One, who nodded.

“Here.” Anchor unhooked the big ring of keys she kept on her belt and handed it to me. “To unlock the room you pick. Come to the diner when you’re done,” she added, then looked over at Lilac and gestured for him to follow her as I took the keys.

“It’s good to see you again,” she told One. She sounded genuine. “Stay as long as you need to heal. You’re welcome here.”

She turned and left. Lilac silently skulked out behind her with a final look at One, then me, his green eyes shadowed.

“I’ll come and check on you this afternoon,” Apollo told One. “How are you feeling? Nauseous? Is the pain bad? Nod your head if you want some painkillers.”

One shook his head and shot Apollo another of his small, sweet smiles. I tried not to stare like a creep.

“If you’re sure.” Apollo looked at me before returning his gaze to One. His eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled behind his medical mask. “Let’s get you up, then.”

Between the three of us, we manoeuvred One up off the gurney. Apollo held the door open as Rig and I supported him between us, the raspy sound of his wings dragging over the floor following us out of the room.

“Which room?” I asked Rig as Apollo left us at the door, retreating back inside.

We started making our way down the covered concrete walkway in front of the room doors. Both of us studiously ignored the open staring from the raiders who were heading toward the diner. It looked like they were coming from the gardening patch, which was tucked in the corner of the camp beside a copse of trees that Cat and Anchor—and One, apparently—had built the perimeter around. That part of the camp wall was made up of junk,

mainly. Old cars and scrap metal and corrugated sheets. I guessed they'd run out of shipping containers by that point.

I tried to ignore the feel of One's side pressing against mine as we walked. He was so tall, and while lean, he felt… imposing. Like his presence was more than a human's ever could be.

My gas mask tended to block most scents, and I wondered briefly what he smelled like. My face got hot at the inappropriate thought.

"The room next to mine is empty," Rig answered me, snapping me out of my thoughts. His voice was a little strained as One limped between us slowly, mindful of the splint now strapped to his leg.

My room was at the very end of the building, with Rig next door to me. The camp had been smaller when we'd got here, and those who'd joined since tended to cluster together at the other end of the building, where Apollo was, because it was further away from the entrance into camp. I didn't mind it, though. Meant things were quieter. Fewer noises at night to disturb the hens, and they could be loud when they got riled up.

I fumbled to find the numbered key on Anchor's laden keyring when we reached the door. As I searched, I sensed someone approaching from behind. My back stiffened.

"Ghost. Rig. What the hell is this?" Cutter's brash voice made me tense up even more. He was one of the camp residents who spent a good portion of his time complaining about life and reminiscing about how good he'd had it before the monsters rose. He was called Cutter because he tended to go on and on about how he'd finally been able to buy the sailing boat—a cutter—that he'd been saving up for his whole working life, just days before "the world went down the shitter".

Of all the raiders here, he would likely be the most hostile to One.

Rig looked back over his shoulder. "Hey, Cutter." His voice was guarded. "We found One at the military base. Badly injured. Apollo just fixed him up."

I glanced back at Cutter before looking down at the keys in my hands, frantically trying to find the right one, my gloved fingers and my haste making me clumsy.

Cutter's voice was incredulous. "And Anchor was okay with that? With you bringing a beastie like this inside the camp walls?"

"This beastie helped *build* this camp," I couldn't help but shoot back. I finally found the right key and hurried to unlock the door. "So relax. One is

fine. Leave him alone."

"Helped build this camp? What the hell are you talking about, boy?"

I gritted my teeth. I hated when he called me that. Just because I wasn't overly tall and he had, for some reason, decided I looked young despite only ever seeing half of my fucking face.

I ignored his question. "Speak to Anchor if you've got a problem," I said shortly, pushing open the door and resituating my hold on One's side to help him into the room.

"Well, this explains why she's called us all to the diner." I could hear the faint sneer in Cutter's voice, but beneath that was a thread of fear. Barely detectible, but I noticed it.

"Great." My voice was flat. "Better get over there, then."

I heard him huff a disdainful sound behind us, but thankfully he shuffled off toward the diner without saying anything more. I felt a frisson of worry slither through my gut as we helped One toward the bed. Shards of light cut through the gloom, dust motes swirling as we disturbed long-stagnant air. It smelled musty in here, and as soon as One was sitting comfortably on the edge of the bed, I moved to the window to open it.

So, Anchor had called the camp to a meeting, no doubt about One's presence. Would they accept him? We were, generally, a tolerant group. We'd helped other monsters before—smaller, more animal-looking ones. But fear drove humans to do things they normally wouldn't. Self-preservation made us harsh and unfeeling. I just had to hope that Anchor stayed firm in her decision to let One heal up here.

"Maybe we should come back and clean up a bit after we see Anchor," I said anxiously, noting the thin layer of dust covering everything. "And we should bring… Do you need anything?" I asked One directly, feeling my face flush. He was just so… *much.*

There was another weird moment that stretched as his big black eyes met mine. Then he shook his head and looked away.

"Nothing at all?" Rig asked, peering at an old painting of a nondescript spring landscape hanging on the wall over the dresser.

Another headshake.

I wondered if One would ever speak again. He had last night, after that monster had gotten scared off in the dark, so we knew that he could. It was fine if he didn't want to, but I was already itching to hear his voice again.

Was it as low and soft as I remembered? Would it sound different in the daylight?

"How about books?" I asked as I unthreaded his room key from Anchor's keyring and placed it on the dresser. "Do you want something to read? We can bring you some."

One hesitated for a second, then nodded. He smiled at me—directly *at* me, for the first time—and my throat closed up for a second with nerves. Then his head twitched, and he looked away again quickly. I could have sworn I saw his cheeks flush.

"Okay." My voice was embarrassingly squawky. I cleared my throat. "Sure. No problem. We'll bring you some after we've spoken to Anchor."

"Get some rest, huh?" Rig smiled at One behind his mask before we made our way back to the still-open door. "We'll be back soon."

One silently watched us leave from behind dark, lank hair, and I closed his door behind us with a gentle click. The air was dry and cool back outside, the sun sitting high in the sky above us. The chicken wire roof left wavy shadowed lines all over the ground, splashing over our boots as we started making our way toward the diner. The camp was deserted, which meant everyone else was probably already waiting in there.

Rig let out a breath. "So. That was pretty painless, all things considered." He winced. "Bad choice of words. I meant that I wasn't sure if One would… y'know… freak out or something."

"Yeah." I thought back on what had just happened in the medical office. My nose twitched as the sickening sound of One tibia snapping—that almost wet *crack*—reverberated in my head again.

I looked over at Rig and nudged him with my elbow. "Why the hell did you keep making me talk in there, huh?" I gave him a weak shove. "Dork."

"He likes your voice," Rig said, like I was a moron for not realising it. "It was obvious. You were keeping him calm."

I snorted, even though something warm flared in my gut. "Bullshit. He flinches if I go within five feet of him."

Rig rolled his eyes. "You overanalyse everything. He's shy, sure. But you talking helped. Trust me."

"Whatever," I mumbled, mainly to mask how pleased the thought made me. Which was ridiculous. I'd met One *hours* ago. What the hell was wrong with me?

Rig pulled open the diner door and gestured for me to go in first. I didn't want to, but couldn't find a reason to refuse, so I apprehensively stepped inside and looked around as every face turned toward me.

I flushed and cleared my throat, ignoring their stares and seeking out Anchor. I wasn't used to having people's eyes on me. I didn't like being the centre of attention. It just made anxiety flare in my gut.

"Ghost. Rig." Anchor nodded at us. "How's One?"

"Seems okay," Rig said, and I was grateful that he spoke so I wouldn't have to. He came to stand beside me, the brush of his arm against mine a solid, comforting presence that relaxed me just a little.

"Good. So." Anchor exhaled and looked around at the silent gathered raiders. "Some of you have probably already seen. We have a beastie in the camp."

"I think I speak for more than just myself when I say I'm not happy about this," Cutter piped up, already glaring daggers at me.

"We've had beasties in the camp before," Bo said, resting thick forearms on the counter as he leaned forward. A damp dishtowel was draped over his left shoulder. Behind him, through the hatch into the kitchen, Daisy peered up at us periodically as she chopped carrots.

"Not big, humanoid ones with giant wings and talons," Rusty, another raider, noted. She was one of the few here who wore a full-face mask, rather than one that just covered the lower half. It was one of those blank white masks they'd sold in crafting stores before the monsters rose, and the sight of it never failed to creep me out. She always wore her long, red hair in a braid, and it was currently pulled over one shoulder as she played with the ends—a nervous habit I'd already clocked in the past.

"Look, this camp has history with One," Anchor said, already sounding tired. "He helped build the perimeter around this place, back when it was just Cat and me. Ghost and Rig found him injured in the military base, so the least we can do is let him heal up here before moving on, alright?"

She gestured at Lilac, who was standing at the side of the room, arms crossed as he leaned one shoulder against the wall. "Lilac's going to keep an eye on him."

"Lilac's not keeping an eye on him right now," someone muttered. I couldn't tell who, even though I scanned every face with narrowed eyes. Damn raider masks. We all wore them to stop the military from being able to identify us, but habit and general wariness meant most of us kept them on

around the camp too. I'd worn mine around other people for so long that I felt naked without it.

At that, Lilac straightened, inclined his head a fraction—somehow managing to make the gesture sardonic—and silently left the diner.

Anchor watched him go before speaking again. "Look, we're not bigots here, are we? We've helped injured beasties before."

"Small, harmless ones!" Cutter sputtered, looking around expectantly, like he was speaking for all present and wanted backup. "Those were more like… treating a deer or a rabbit. This is like… like… thinking you can help an injured wolf and it'll magically become loyal. It's bullshit."

He narrowed his eyes at Anchor. "This wouldn't've happened if Cat had still been running things."

Anchor spluttered in disbelief. "Cat would have been the *first* to welcome that beastie into this camp! So you can shut your damn mouth, Cutter." She pointed a sharp finger at him. "Don't give me that bullshit. If you hate the way I run this place on my own, then leave. Nothing's keeping you here."

Cutter's ruddy face flushed above his mask. He fell silent, but anger still simmered behind his eyes.

Anchor looked around at the silent group. I could see her forcing herself to calm down. This wasn't her forte—Cat was the one who was good at speaking to people. Good at getting them on side. He'd been a solid, comforting presence for most of us here. Steady and trustworthy and cool-headed.

Anchor was good at keeping things in order. Taking inventory. Making sure no one took more than their fair share. She was a stickler and a taskmaster, and not the most sympathetic—which didn't exactly endear her to most folks.

But since Cat was gone, both jobs now fell to her.

"We run this place fairly," she said. "So we'll put it to a vote on whether One can stay to heal up or not. But let me remind you," she added, "of the one thing we have *all* learned out here. Appearances mean nothing. Monster or human—it means nothing. Our actions define us. And everything I've seen of One points to him being a decent person."

She paused for a moment. "Plenty of us have had run-ins with humans out here who *looked* decent, and ended up being anything but. So I'm asking you not to judge One on how he looks, or what he is. I'm asking you

to judge the situation for what it is at its core—a creature was being held against his will by the military, who tortured him. Hurt him. And now, we have an opportunity to help him. To give him a safe space to rest and heal.

"We'll take precautions, sure. We'll be careful. We won't trust him blindly. But." She straightened her shoulders as she placed her hands on her hips. "*I* trust One. I trusted him all those years ago, when Cat and I were helpless, dumb kids out here just trying to stay alive. One helped us then and took nothing in return. It's time for us to repay the favour."

"Hear, hear," Bo piped up from behind the counter, his low voice solemn. When I met his gaze for a moment, he smiled at me from behind his mask, deep laugh lines fanning out from the corners of his eyes.

"Then let's put it to a vote," Rig said quickly, no doubt eager to get it done while people were still being swayed by Anchor's words.

Anchor nodded. "Those who are happy to let One stay while he heals up?"

Hands rose all over the room, including mine, Rig's, Anchor's, Bo's and Daisy's. I quickly counted. "Fourteen."

I was already smiling behind my mask, because there were only seventeen of us here in the room, Lilac off watching One and two other raiders keeping watch on the wall.

And that meant One would be staying.

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CHAPTER TEN

My inexplicably good mood at the fact that One could stay didn't last long. It soured the moment Anchor called me over while everyone else filed out of the diner. Cutter was muttering angrily to another raider, but he was always full of hot air and impotent rage, so I didn't pay it much mind.

"So, how soon can you go back out to the base?" Anchor asked me when I reached her.

My insides clenched up with tension. And the beginning tendrils of the fear that never left, no matter how many times you journeyed out into the Wastes.

"Um…" I rubbed at my forehead nervously, not wanting to disappoint her. But shit, I didn't want to go back out there yet. I needed time to relax. Decompress.

To forget the paralysing terror of hearing that monster sniff us out in the pitch black.

My throat closed up as I thought of that happening again, this time when I was alone. I'd have to go back that way to get to the base. It was the quickest route. What if the monster smelled me and remembered my scent? What if it had recently made that spot its territory?

What if it was quicker than me?

"I know I made you wait to go initially, but now that it looks like the military definitely isn't going back there, it feels… urgent, you know?" Anchor was saying. "Like someone else might go and take anything that could lead us to Cat before you've had a chance to get back."

I nodded automatically, my top lip prickling with sweat at the thought of stepping back into that gutted, blackened base, the crunch of glass under my boots the only thing breaking the crippling silence. Of having to walk past the half-missing body of that soldier that I'd had to drag away from the truck we'd taken.

But this time, I'd be doing it alone.

I tried to rationalise my thoughts. Tried to calm my fast-beating heart. I'd been out there plenty of times alone. I'd poked around in creepy abandoned buildings—alone—more times than I could count. Why did this feel different? Why was everything in me telling me to refuse?

I thought of One and swallowed. I wanted to be here to see him heal, and maybe come out of his shell a bit. It was pathetic, and ridiculous, but a little spark of jealousy—and bitterness—flared when I thought of Rig getting to be there for One as he got better, while I had to be out in the Wastes on my own, searching fruitlessly for a ghost. It sounded juvenile, but… it wasn't fair.

Cat was gone. He wasn't coming back. And a small, ugly part of me resented the fact that Anchor was willing to risk *my* life by sending me out there so often to look for someone who, in all likelihood, was long dead. It wasn't like I didn't hate the fact that Cat was gone. I didn't *want* Cat to be dead. But the odds of him being gone for this long, for no reason, but still being alive and well, were astronomical. He wouldn't have just abandoned this camp.

For some reason, though, I couldn't find the courage to say any of that to Anchor. And she seemed determined to ignore all the logical reasons why he hadn't come back from a simple fishing trip to the river six months ago.

"I, um… maybe… a few days?" I offered in answer to Anchor's question, my voice uncertain.

Fear clenched in my gut when she frowned. I knew it was irrational, but that didn't stop it spiralling through me.

She's going to kick you out, an insidious voice in my brain whispered. *If you can't be useful, why would she keep you?*

"Or maybe sooner," I heard myself blurting out. "I just need to… I didn't sleep last night, so I just need to rest and eat. Then maybe… maybe tomorrow?"

Fuck. I needed to shut the hell up. Soon I'd be telling her I could be back out there in an hour.

Anchor's brow smoothed out. "Okay." She smiled at me behind her mask. "Great. Thanks, Ghost. Now go get some rest before dinner."

She clapped me on the arm and left the diner. I stood frozen to the spot for a few moments, sweating behind my gas mask, trying to work out how quickly I could make the journey to the military base and back.

Just as I was trying to calculate what time I'd have to leave so that I wouldn't end up anywhere near where that monster had sniffed us out by the time it got dark, Bo's low, melodic voice broke through. "You could always tell her you don't want to go, Ghost."

I blinked and looked over at him. Behind his plain white mask—kept spotlessly clean by Daisy, despite cooking and preparing food all day—Bo's face was kind. He was a big, broad guy, and while he could look intimidating, he was probably the nicest and gentlest person here.

Before the monsters rose, Bo had worked in a beachside café somewhere in southern California. He'd been visiting his girlfriend's family in St Louis when the world turned to hell. They'd managed to make it to one of the military's safe zones on the east coast, before settling in one of the new coastal cities when they started forming. But a few years in, his girlfriend had gotten sick. He said he still didn't know what it was, to this day. Just that her fever had gotten worse and worse, until it had killed her. Wasn't like many people could afford medical treatment anymore. He'd left for the Wastes a few weeks later.

I shook my head. "It's fine," I answered automatically, my voice toneless.

Feeling self-conscious, I glanced behind Bo at Daisy, and my face flushed when I saw her watching me through the hatch, her dark eyes sympathetic. She was just as nice as Bo, and almost intimidatingly shrewd.

Daisy had been over in New York from Korea, scouting prospective locations for her new fusion restaurant when the monsters came. She'd told me before that she still spent most nights wondering if her husband and young daughter had survived the monster rising, back in Busan. The city was on the coast, she said, so she hoped they'd been safe. But she had no idea. And no way of ever finding out.

Once, when a nomad had traded us a bottle of whisky in exchange for a safe place to sleep for the night, Daisy had drunkenly told me that she came out to the Wastes because she felt like she had nothing to lose. She'd told me her raider name was Daisy because that had been her daughter's favourite flower. She'd been tearful. Drunk from a single glass of the liquor and not used to drinking alcohol, her petite frame poorly equipped to handle much booze. I hadn't mentioned it to her since, and sometimes I wondered if she even remembered saying any of it to me.

Their pasts made me feel like a privileged brat. I'd been so young when the monsters rose, I barely remembered the horror of those initial days and weeks. I certainly hadn't experienced such devastating loss. My parents had taken me to New York, and we'd lived in a tiny apartment in one of the cramped high-rises. My dad had quickly become an alcoholic, buying

bootleg booze that smelled like paint thinner from back-alley dealers. My mom had worked herself to the bone to make enough for us to eat. By the time I turned eighteen, they were shells of their former selves, and I could see myself going down the same path if I didn't do something.

"Sweetie, you are perfectly entitled to say no," Daisy said, her accent still thick after all these years.

"I don't mind," I heard myself reply by rote, but it didn't fool Bo and Daisy.

"Yeah, yeah, sure." Bo rolled his eyes. "You just love going out into that hellhole all alone, huh? Running for your life from the beasties?"

"I never said I *love* it," I countered defensively. "But it's—it's fine. I don't mind doing it. Means no one else has to."

Bo grunted to tell me he disagreed, straightening up from the counter and heading for the door that led back into the kitchen.

"Why should no one else have to?" Daisy said forcefully. "That lazy Cutter does nothing these days. Send *him* out there. No big loss if he doesn't come back," she added in a mutter.

I heard Bo tut as he took up his place beside Daisy, shooting me a stern look through the hatch. "Either way, make sure you rest first, Ghost. Don't let Anchor convince you to go back out there before you're ready."

"I won't," I said, exhaustion creeping over me. I really did need to rest. "What time's dinner?" I asked to change the subject, even though dinner was served at the same time every day.

Daisy rolled her eyes. "You know perfectly well what time it will be. Now go." She shooed me away with her knife. "Go sleep."

I obeyed, pushing my way out of the diner and back toward the motel. My eyes immediately found Lilac sitting on the ground beside the door to One's room, legs stretched out in front of him, ankles crossed. He was whittling something again.

He glanced up with a quirk of his brow when I stopped in front of him. "All good?" I asked.

Lilac nodded.

I exhaled. "Okay. I'm gonna go get a few hours' sleep. Come get me if One… if he needs anything."

I felt myself flush self-consciously and felt ridiculous. I wasn't being weird or… too eager, right? It was a perfectly normal thing to say. Right?

I turned and walked to my room without saying anything else, wondering if Lilac thought I was acting strange. I wasn't. I was just trying to be helpful. It wasn't like by *anything* I meant… well, *anything*. It wasn't like I'd said, 'Hey, if the monster wants a quick handie to take the edge off, just let me know!'

I groaned out loud as I quickly unlocked my door and stepped into the cool darkness of my room. God, what was wrong with my brain? How had it ended up *there*? I could feel the blood pounding in my head as I tried desperately hard not to picture that scenario.

Feeling restless, I pulled off my mask and was immediately distracted from my spiralling thoughts as relief made me sigh. I'd been wearing that thing for almost two days solid, and I could feel the sore patches of skin from where the edges had rubbed.

I'd made sure to close my curtains before Rig and I left for the military base, so thankfully my room wasn't too warm. I reached between the two strips of ratty fabric to shove open the window, having to push hard against the broken latch on the left. I heard one of the girls squawk with alarm from the yard at the sudden sound.

I dropped my mask on the small table in the corner of my room and finally eased off my backpack, wincing at the ache in my tight, sore shoulders. I needed a shower. Rig and Cat had constructed an outhouse-type structure years ago, a wooden building with separate toilet cubicles and several primitive, but private, showers that used rain or river water we collected, filtering it through wooden buckets with holes drilled into the bottoms. If it was sunny, the water could *maybe* come out lukewarm. In the winter, it was a bitch.

Before I went back out there, though, I sank down onto the edge of my bed and rested my elbows on my knees, dragging my hands down my tired face. When I straightened back up, I caught sight of myself in the old mirror above the dresser on the other side of my room. Tired, pale blue eyes looked back at me. My brown hair was a mess, sticking up from where I'd run my fingers through it at some point. My face was drawn and pale. Around my mouth and over the bridge of my nose was a red line from the hard edge of my gas mask.

I grimaced and stood up quickly. I needed to shower and nap. Then I'd feel more human again.

The thought made me picture One, just a few doors down. I wondered what he was doing. Did he sleep? I couldn’t remember if we’d asked. He’d appeared calmer, at least, when we’d left him in his room. More lucid.

I pictured his big, black eyes, studded with faint swirls of colour. Like the sky at night when I couldn’t sleep, so I went and laid down on the highest shipping container to stargaze. I pictured his pale lips stretching into a sweet smile as he looked at me.

My stomach lurched, and I quickly gathered up my towel.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

After showering, I slept for longer than I'd expected. It was almost dark when I finally woke up, which meant dinner would be soon. I still felt foggy and overly tired, like I'd woken up at the wrong point in my sleep cycle. I exhaled hard and scrubbed at my face as I sat up, memories of the last two days rushing back and making my gut swoop with nerves.

I wondered what One was doing.

Would it be weird if I went to see how he was? I wasn't sure if he'd want to be disturbed. Especially by me. He'd seemed okay with me by the end, but I couldn't forget how he'd practically cringed away from me when we'd first come across him.

I worried as I got dressed in clean clothes. Black pants, my grey combat boots that were always a little dirty, a long-sleeved grey shirt and a black hooded jacket over the top. I hooked my crowbar over my belt but left the useless shotgun on the table. It was only for decoration, anyway. Finally, with a sigh, I pulled on my mask, adjusting until it felt comfortable.

I decided to check in on Rig first. Maybe we could go visit One together, then I wouldn't feel so… obvious. Like everyone was staring at me, knowing I'd already had inappropriate thoughts about the injured and traumatised beastie in our camp. We'd been the ones to find him and bring him back here, so it would be fine if we went to see how he was doing, right?

Lilac was still sitting by One's room when I pulled open my door and stepped outside. He looked serene, head leaning back against the wall, eyes closed. His whittling knife and a small figurine sat abandoned in his lap.

His head rolled toward me immediately, eyes opening.

"Hey." I pulled my door shut. "Is he… How's it been?" I was already blushing again. Goddamnit. Why? It was an innocent question!

"Fine. Silent." Lilac picked up his knife and figurine to start whittling again.

"I'll, um… I'll go see him in a minute, so you can take a break," I told Lilac as I knocked on Rig's door. He simply nodded, not looking up.

Rig pulled open the door a few seconds later, an unlit hand-rolled cigarette hanging out the side of his mouth. His mask was off and the hood

of his sweatshirt was down, so I could see the bristles of his light brown hair that he kept shaved close to his skull, and the five o'clock shadow turning his jaw faintly grey. Rig's nose was pretty big, with a bump from where he'd broken it once when he got into a drunken brawl with a passing trader who'd made a lewd comment to Anchor, but he was classically handsome, with a strong, square jaw and a nice mouth.

There were huge bags under his eyes. "Have you slept yet?" I asked as he stepped to the side, letting me in. I eyed the pile of indeterminate stuff he'd collected at the base before we'd found One, strewn out over the floor in his already-messy, junk-filled room.

"Nah, wanted to go through my loot first." Rig grabbed a box of matches and lit his cigarette. The room was already hazy with smoke, but my mask prevented the worst of it from getting to me. Besides, his room, his lungs.

"I have to go back," I told him, trying to hide the despondence in my voice at the thought. "I can grab some more stuff for you. Just give me a list of the kind of thing you're after. Unless you want to go back with me?" I couldn't help but ask, embarrassed by the hopeful lilt to my voice.

Rig grimaced. "Sorry man, but no thanks. You know my outings into the Wastes are few and far between these days. After last night, I'm done for a while."

I suppressed my sigh. "Yeah. Okay. Well, just…" I gestured at the pile of stuff on the floor. "Tell me what you want me to get."

"Will do. Thanks." He clasped my shoulder briefly as he passed me to go sit cross-legged in the only clear spot on the floor.

I watched him silently for a moment. "So have you… Is One okay?" I asked, trying to keep my voice as casual as possible.

Rig took a draw of his cigarette and squinted when the smoke got into his eyes, picking up some nondescript piece of computer equipment to examine it. "I've left him alone to rest."

I nodded, pursing my lips behind my mask. "I might go grab some books from Cat's room for him. He'll probably get bored. I mean, he's probably already *super* bored if he's been stuck in that base for god knows how long. What do you think he likes reading?" Nerves were making me babble. "Wait, do you think he *can* read English? It's not like it's his native language. But then he indicated that he wanted books when I asked, so he must be able to—"

“Ghost,” Rig interrupted, peering up at me as he pulled the cigarette away from his mouth and exhaled a stream of grey smoke. “Just take him some books. He’ll either read them or he won’t. Chill.”

I flushed behind my mask. “I’m just saying—”

“You overthink *everything*, my dude.” Rig laughed and got to his feet, coming over to pull me into a brief hug. “I love you, you nerd.”

I hugged him back but shoved him in the gut half-heartedly as we separated. “Shut up, dork.” After a pause, I relented, and added in a gruff voice, “I love you too.”

“Just grab him a variety,” Rig said as he wandered over to the window and shoved it open. “Wonder what a beastie likes reading about.” He snickered. “Maybe romance novels?”

“Do you want to come with me?” I asked.

I wasn’t sure if I wanted Rig to say yes or no. I was nervous, and would have felt less weird and awkward if Rig was there too, but at the same time, my stomach swooped at the thought of spending time alone with One. Maybe he’d speak again if there was only one person there.

Maybe he’d smile at me again.

“I want to finish going through this stuff before dinner, but I’ll go see him after I’ve eaten,” Rig said, sealing my fate.

My gut clenched with a rush of pleasant nerves. “Okay, then.” My mouth was dry.

I left Rig’s room and nodded once at Lilac as I made my way to the diner to find Anchor and grab Cat’s room key. As I walked across the camp, I wondered what the hell was wrong with me. Why was I getting like this over One? I didn’t know him. Was it just because he was unusual? Was it because he really was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen in my life? But that didn’t mean he was… It didn’t mean he’d even be *nice*. Even though he seemed nice. Sweet.

But still. He didn’t speak. Maybe he’d be really boring. Maybe we’d having nothing in common. I mean, realistically, how much *could* we have in common? I was a dull, forgettable human raider who spent his time skulking in the shadows, spying on others, being invisible. He was a beautiful, winged monster who’d travelled to this world through an interdimensional tear. Everything about him made people want to stare at him, like a beautiful peacock. And before he was captured by the military,

he'd wandered the Wastes helping wayward human teenagers who were surviving by the skin of their teeth. So, he most likely *was* nice.

The thought made me deflate. Alright, so I clearly found One… attractive. I'd had some weird, instantaneous reaction to him. But I had to be realistic here. What the hell would someone like One see in *me*? Especially with people like Rig and Lilac around. Rig was handsome and good-natured and charismatic in a goofy way. Lilac was mysterious and brooding and interesting looking, with his black hair and bright green eyes.

I was just… bland. Average brown hair, blue eyes and too-pale skin. Average features. I wasn't too tall or too short. I wasn't thick and super muscular, or willowy and slender. I couldn't have been more forgettable if I tried. And that was the problem. I *did* try. I didn't like attention anyway, but the jobs I did for the camp meant I had to actively *avoid* it.

So yeah. I could find One fascinating, and beautiful. I could crave *his* attention. But the odds were, I wouldn't get it. That didn't mean I wouldn't try and be there for him. It didn't mean I wasn't going to help him, or make things easier, or be kind. I wasn't a prick. Despite my weird, instant attraction to One, that didn't mean I didn't also care about him as a person. About seeing him get better.

Still, my self-deprecating thoughts meant I was a little less giddy with those hopeful, fluttery nerves when I pushed my way into the diner and saw Anchor leaning over the counter, talking to Bo. She straightened as I approached.

"Hey." I nodded down at the thick, heavy keyring on her belt. "Can I have the key to Cat's room? Just want to grab some books for One."

After a pause, she nodded and reached down to unhook the ring. "That's a good point, actually. One might have seen Cat, if he was taken to the base. We should ask him."

I nodded automatically, then perked up a moment later. "You mean instead of me going back there?" I asked hopefully.

Anchor shook her head as he handed me the keyring. "I think you should still go back to look around. If One was held in a cell, he might not have seen anything anyway. Still worth asking him, though."

I deflated. "Sure thing."

"Do you think you'll be heading back out in the morning?" she asked me.

I bit the inside of my cheek hard, but found myself nodding. *Goddamnit*.

“Great.” Anchor nodded down at the keys. “Bring them right back, okay?”

“Yep, okay.” I nodded as I backed up, before turning to leave the diner.

Cat’s room was on the upper level of the motel block, so I jogged to the staircase at the side of the building closest to Apollo’s room. I’d been in Cat’s room a few times since he’d vanished, to borrow books. In fact, I had a couple in my room that I should have brought back with me, but I could do it another time. I had a thing for books about nature and animals, which probably stemmed from when I started reading up on how to look after the hens.

Cat’s room was no smaller than anyone else’s, but at some point he’d dragged in several bookcases that now lined the wall next to the bathroom door, making the space feel tiny. The shelves were crammed with books, and more were stacked on the floor around them. All kinds of books: mysteries and fantasy. Horror and sci-fi. Romance, thrillers, poetry. Encyclopaedias, self-help and reference books. Even how-to guides and manuals for items Cat didn’t even have. If he found a book while out scavenging, he took it—and books were still pretty easy to find, seeing as most people out here were more concerned with surviving than being entertained.

I stood in Cat’s dark, musty room and wondered what books to grab for One. What would a beastie like? If I got him fiction, would he even understand the concept of humans writing made-up stories for other humans? What if I gave him a… I don’t know… werewolf romance, and he thought werewolves were real?

Wait… maybe they were in his world.

Hearing Rig’s voice in my head telling me I overanalysed and worried about everything, I clenched my jaw and just grabbed at random. I didn’t even read the titles as I stacked them in my arms and carried them carefully back outside, juggling them as I re-locked Cat’s door. I pocketed the keys and jogged down the steps and back to One’s room.

“I’ll be back in a sec,” I told Lilac as I deposited the stack of books on the ground beside him.

He quirked a brow and picked up the book at the top of the stack as I turned and made my way back to the diner to return the keys. I didn’t stay long enough for Anchor to draw me into a conversation or get me to

somehow stupidly promise to leave for the military base even sooner. I was jittery with nerves as I crossed back to the motel.

“Interesting selection,” Lilac drawled in his flat voice as he stood up, pocketing his knife and figurine.

I felt my cheeks get hot behind my mask. “I didn’t even look,” I said quickly, now worrying about what I’d picked up. “Why, is it—? Never mind. I just grabbed them at random.”

Lilac ignored me, jerking his chin at the door. “Come get me if you need me. I’ll be in my room.”

“Sure, yeah. Thanks.” I watched him leave, trying to ignore the way my heart rate had jumped. My palms were sweaty. I hadn’t put on my gloves, so I wiped them nervously on my pants.

Why was I so nervous?

I picked up the stack of books and knocked on One’s door.

I started getting even more nervous when he hadn’t answered after thirty seconds.

I tentatively knocked again. Cleared my throat. “One?” I called, resisting the urge to look around furtively in case anyone was nearby, watching. “It’s—it’s Ghost. Are you… okay?”

Still nothing.

My face was hot as I shifted the books awkwardly in my arms. “Can I come in?” I asked, raising my voice just a little. I had a tendency to speak quietly, and my mask always made it even harder for people to hear me.

I went very still, trying to listen for any movement from within the room. My stomach jumped when, a second later, I heard the rasping sound of One’s wings dragging over the floor.

The door clicked open, and as it swung inward, I saw One limping quickly back into the gloom of the room, shoulders hunched and hair still hiding most of his features.

As I made my way hesitantly inside, he sat down on the edge of the bed and wrapped his arms around himself, wings crumpled and trapped awkwardly underneath him. His head twitched, like a nervous tic. His arms were still shaking badly.

I swallowed, unsure of what to say or do. He seemed to have reverted back to how he’d been when we first found him. Dazed and scared and a little out of it. Looking back now, it was obvious how much he’d calmed the longer we’d been with him.

Maybe leaving him alone had been a bad idea.

"I… I brought you some books," I offered, my voice stilted with nerves. I set them on the small table in the corner.

The curtains were half drawn, letting in the last of the daylight, which was orangey-red as the sun set. It made the room dim, but at least the air was no longer so stifling thanks to the open window. As I cast about for something to say, I heard a faint thud come from Rig's room through the wall, followed by an annoyingly cheerful whistle that made me want to roll my eyes.

"Do you… do you want anything? Food?" I asked One. I saw his shoulders tense up, then relax a fraction. He shook his head before it twitched.

"Okay," I said quickly, tangling my fingers together. "How about… um… Want me to pick a book for you?" I grabbed the one at the top of the stack and lifted it, glancing down at the cover. "This one is—"

My face flamed and I immediately put it back down. Gay erotica. Probably not the best first choice to put him at ease.

I cleared my throat and grabbed the next one. "There's a sci-fi—um, science fiction—novel set in space." I picked up the third and turned it over to quickly scan the back. "A romantic comedy, by the looks…"

I put them down and spread out the rest. A recipe book for pies across America, a self-help guide on how to quit smoking—maybe I'd give that one to Rig—and a manual for an oven manufactured in 1994.

God, this was a terrible selection.

I noticed as I'd been speaking that One had slowly unclenched, just a little, the tight lines of his wide shoulders softening. But he tensed back up when I fell silent. I remembered what Rig had said, about why he'd made me keep talking back in Apollo's room when the medic was fixing One's leg.

Could he really find my voice… soothing?

I made a face behind my mask, glad that One's head was bent and he wasn't looking at me. Really? *My* voice? It was pretty nondescript. Boring. Just a normal human male voice.

"Do you… want me to read to you?" I heard myself asking cautiously, and my stomach dropped with nervous anticipation as the question hung in the air between us.

One’s head twitched, but then he lifted it to look at me. My chest ached a little at the vacant, scared look in his big black eyes. Yeah, leaving him alone had been a terrible idea.

One blinked hard, like he was trying to come back to himself but couldn’t. He nodded, but it turned into another head twitch. My heart thudded hard in my chest when he parted his lips, as if he was going to speak. His eyes darted about, like he was trying to remember the words, or clear his head enough to get them out. But after a few seconds of silence, he just made a soft, frustrated sound in the back of his throat and looked away again, his alien features distraught.

“Okay,” I said quickly, grabbing the romance novel and pulling out the rickety wooden chair tucked under the table to sit down. “That’s no problem. I can do that.”

I cleared my throat, then cleared it again as I opened to the first page of the book. After another quick glance up at One, who was still hunched on the edge of the bed, shaking arms wrapped tight around his middle, I started reading out loud.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Not long after we'd got here, all those years ago, Rig had started collecting solar panels, lanterns, fairy lights—anything solar-powered he could get his hands on. This was back when he went out scavenging far more often, eager to pull his weight out in the field, so to speak, and collect as much as he could for the camp.

The camp was littered with solar fairy lights and lanterns to give us light when it got dark. There were places across the Wastes that still got power, and for the first few years we were here, we'd had it. But at some point either the military had shut it off for us out of spite, or something had happened to the power lines in our area. Everything was military-run now, including power and water in both the coastal cities and for the various military bases across the Wastes. We hadn't ever outright done anything to piss the military off, except for existing, but I'd heard enough horror stories to know cutting off our resources was a tame gesture on their part.

The room was getting dark as the sun set, and I could feel my eyes starting to strain to see the words on the page. My voice was getting hoarse and my throat was dry, but I hadn't stopped reading. Because every time I glanced up, One was just a bit more relaxed. He'd slowly unclenched from that tense, hunched-over position, eventually slipping to the floor to lean back against the side of the bed.

My voice stuttered for a second when I glanced up, momentarily distracted by his long legs. The uninjured one was cocked, with a wickedly taloned foot flat on the ground, while the splinted one was stretched out gingerly. His head was tilted back against the bed, eyes closed, mouth soft. I swallowed and quickly looked back down, trying to find my place in the text.

A knock at the door made me jump, and I saw One's head snap up as he drew up his legs, wrapping his arms around his knees. We both eyed the door without moving.

"It's me!" Rig called, sounding muffled. I realised why a second later when he called out again around a mouthful of food, "I brought you some dinner."

I folded over the corner of the page I was on, saying a mental apology to Cat, and set down the book. “Shall I let him in?” I asked One as I stood up.

He nodded, but looked a little tense again. I felt a wave of irritation at Rig for undoing all the progress I’d made putting One at ease reading that stupid book, but it morphed into affection when I pulled open the door and he grinned at me, his mask already hanging off one ear, three bowls of steaming stew precariously balanced in his arms and the handle of a solar lamp looped over his elbow.

I took two of the bowls immediately, even though Rig was surprisingly graceful and adept with his hands. Guess that was one of the reasons why he was so good at fixing stuff.

“Thanks,” I said gratefully, mouth already watering as I carried the bowls to the table. It was Daisy’s kimchi stew; my favourite. She made her kimchi the traditional way, burying it in the ground in big brown pots in the winter.

A wave of nerves rushed over me when I realised I’d have to take my mask off in front of One to eat. I hadn’t taken my mask off in front of anyone but Rig in… years. Even before that, Cat and Anchor were the only other people who’d seen my face, ever since I left New York. I never ate in the diner, always taking my meals back to my room, but a fair number of us did that, so no one thought it was weird. I always kept my mask on until I was safely in my room.

It was almost like… armour for me now. The thought of One seeing my entire face—seeing *me*—was almost pathetically daunting.

“How are you feeling, buddy?” Rig was asking One as he wandered over to the table, spooning in another mouthful of stew. He looked down at the books on the table with interest. “You’re reading? Cool.”

I cleared my throat, feeling strangely embarrassed. “Uh, yeah, I was just __”

“Oh shit, were you reading this one?” Before I could snatch it, Rig was picking up the book with two muscular, half-naked men kissing on the cover. “*Nice*. Why didn’t you come get me?” He turned it over and started avidly reading the back cover.

“I wasn’t reading that one, dork,” I muttered as I picked up one of the bowls and turned to One. He was still sitting on the floor, knees pulled up and arms loosely wrapped around them. While tenser than he’d been, he still appeared lucid, at least.

“Um, do you want some stew?” I asked him, my throat tightening when he looked up at me and our eyes met. He gave me a tiny smile and shook his head.

I looked away quickly, blinking. “Okay, no problem.” I hesitated, then looked back at him. “Do you… not need to eat?”

Another head shake that turned into a twitch. This one was a smaller, less severe movement than the others had been, but One’s straight dark brows still pinched together in frustration. He looked down at his hands.

“Come on, man, dig in.” Rig thumped down in the other chair and ate another bite of stew as he placed the solar lantern in the centre of the table. He probably thought he was being subtle when he stretched out a finger to slowly inch the erotica novel closer to him.

My knee cracked as I sank back down in my seat. I didn’t look up, trying to appear casual as I reached up to pull off my mask. I rubbed self-consciously at the red line I knew was cutting across the bridge of my nose as I carefully placed the mask on the table.

I went to grab my bowl but froze up when I felt One’s eyes on me. My breath caught in my throat.

I slowly shifted my gaze over to him. He was still sitting on the floor beside the bed, and his endless black eyes were fixed on my face. We stared at each other for another of those stretched moments where everything stood still.

One’s eyes were clearer than they’d been all evening. They flickered as he looked at me, and my stomach twisted with sweet, fearful pleasure when his gaze roamed, taking in the slope of my nose. My mouth. I licked my lips nervously and his eyes flared for a split second.

When our eyes met again, I couldn’t breathe. My heart was pounding, and my fingertips went numb. I rubbed them against my thumbs nervously, one by one.

“Come on, Ghost, keep reading.” Rig’s voice cut through the heavy air between us like a shard of glass. One’s eyes flickered over to him, then down. I reached out to pull my bowl closer, ignoring the faint tremble in my hands.

“Anchor said you’re heading back to the base in the morning?” Rig asked me, and from the corner of my eye I saw One’s head lift to look at me again.

I nodded and shovelled stew into my mouth, uncomfortable.

“I’ll make a list of stuff to keep an eye out for.” Rig pushed his empty bowl away and looked at me, brown eyes uncharacteristically serious. “Be careful, Ghost. Seriously.”

“I will,” I muttered, eating fast, ravenous despite the nerves still swirling in my belly from the look that had just been in One’s eyes.

“There wasn’t anyone else still in there with you, was there, One?” Rig asked. One shook his head. It twitched a moment later.

“Do you think Cat *was* there at some point?” Rig then asked me quietly, toying with the dog-eared corner of the erotica novel.

I hesitated to answer, scraping out the last of the stew from the bottom of the bowl with my spoon. The sound was loud in the room. “No,” I finally said.

Rig exhaled. “Me neither.” He peered over at One. “Hey, One, do you remember Cat? When you helped build this camp?”

One nodded jerkily.

“Do you remember seeing him at the base? Maybe he was… being held like you were?”

One shook his head, eyes darting to me then away again just as fast. His chest started rising a little faster. As though talking or even thinking about the military base panicked him.

I quickly picked up the book. “Let’s keep reading.”

Rig looked back over and grinned. “Cool.” But then he pouted. “Not this one?” he asked, nodding down at the novel in front of him.

I shot him a tiny smirk. “You can take that one with you, dork.”

I was desperately in need of a drink of water when a loud, undignified snort from Rig interrupted my reading over an hour later. He’d fallen asleep a while ago, sprawled uncomfortably in his chair, head tipped back and mouth hanging open.

My lips twitched when I noticed One eyeing him as well. A few moments later, Rig snorted again, scrunching his nose up before settling back. Then the snoring began.

I stretched out a leg and kicked him gently. “Hey.”

Rig sucked in a sharp breath as he jerked awake, head tipping forward. He squinted at me, reaching up to rub an eye. “Huh?”

“Go to bed.”

Rig let out a jaw-cracking yawn and stood up, lifting his arms over his head in a big stretch. “You should too, if you’re heading back out in the morning.”

“Mm,” I answered with a noncommittal sound, shooting a brief look at One. My fingers played with the torn edge of the book cover.

“Hey, tomorrow I’ll take you to the showers,” Rig said to One around another yawn. “And I can show you around the camp, if you want.”

My stomach panged with bitter jealousy at the fact that I’d be out on my own in the Wastes while Rig got to spend time with One. I watched silently as One nodded and shot Rig a tiny smile.

“Are you sure you don’t want this?” Rig asked him, picking up the third bowl of stew—cold now—and shoving it in front of me when One shook his head. “Eat it,” he told me. “And make sure you go and get something from Daisy and Bo in the morning before you leave.”

I rolled my eyes but pulled the bowl closer. “I still have some stuff in my bag. I’ll probably be leaving at dawn,” I said, my skin prickling at the feel of One watching me carefully. I shoved a spoonful of stew in my mouth and chewed.

“So? You know Daisy’s always up early.” Rig bent down and kissed my temple. “Look after yourself. Be careful.”

“Always am.” I ignored the swirl of nerves in my belly at the thought of going back out there once again. I pushed away the half-eaten bowl of stew, no longer hungry.

“Night, One. I’ll come knock in the morning.” Rig smiled at the beastie as he made his way to the door, the erotica novel tucked sneakily under his arm with his mask. A moment later, he was gone.

I cleared my throat and quickly picked up the book to start reading again. My eyes were already strained from reading by the low light the solar lantern gave out, but I wasn’t ready to go. I didn’t like the thought of leaving One alone again. He’d relaxed over the course of the evening—his limbs had gotten less tense, and his features had softened, eyes no longer bracketed with lines of stress. I was worried about how he’d be in the morning if he was left alone all night.

So I stayed, even though I really needed to sleep before heading back out. Even though I knew I was being reckless and stupid by staying up,

reading a goddamn romance novel to a beastie when I had to be as sharp and alert as possible travelling alone in the Wastes.

Just a little longer, I thought, unable to stop myself from glancing up at One through my eyelashes. He had his knees drawn up again, arms clasped loosely around them, his head tipped back on the edge of the bed. The huge, curved talons topping his wings hung over his shoulders, but they didn't look all that intimidating when he was like this.

His eyes were shut, which gave me a few precious seconds to greedily take in the otherworldly beauty of his face. The wide, sharp cheekbones casting hollows in the weak orange light from the lantern. The dark, straight slashes for brows, prominent against the almost ghoulish white of his skin. The small nose and sharp outline of his lips. Those raised, spidery black lines were distorted on the right side of his face, like they'd bled into the burned and scarred skin. My chest hurt at the sight of it, but at least it didn't seem to be causing him any pain.

One's eyes opened, and even though I felt a nervous flush rising up my throat, I forced myself not to look away when his obsidian gaze found mine. We stared at each other, and I felt an almost overwhelming need to hear his voice again. To have him say something to me. Anything.

I realised I'd fallen silent, the book lying forgotten in my lap. I gave myself just a few more seconds to take him in before I tore my gaze away and looked down at the page again to start reading.

I'd stay just a little bit longer.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A sharp pain darted behind my eyeballs every time I moved them, and my throat was still sore even though I'd guzzled down plenty of water. I was too tired to be out here, especially after hours and hours of walking.

I'd ended up falling asleep in One's room. At some point, I'd gotten too uncomfortable in the rickety wooden chair at the table, so I'd stretched out on the floor with my back to the wall and carried on reading, my throat aching, mouth dry.

Next thing I knew, I was jerking awake in the low, grey light of dawn, the book abandoned in my lap. One had been in the exact same spot, eyes closed, though they opened the moment I moved. I didn't know if he'd been sleeping or not. He still hadn't said anything, but nodded once when I whispered that I'd be back either tonight or tomorrow morning, and that Rig would keep him company in the meantime.

As I approached the abandoned military base, I forgot all of that in an instant. The tiredness. The ache in my head and my throat. The sweet flurry of nerves I felt when I'd woken up and seen One's face. When I'd shot him a small smile before putting on my mask and leaving the room in the intimate quiet of early morning.

I forgot it all as I stared into the dim depths of the base. Because something had been here.

There were scuff marks on the ground leading up to the bowed doors—marks I knew we hadn't made when we'd been here. I didn't know what it was exactly, but I could just *tell* stuff had been disturbed out here. And the air felt… charged. Like there was static. The hair on the back of my neck was standing up, scalp prickling with awareness.

I glanced over at the empty spot where the car we'd taken had once sat. The torso of the soldier was gone.

I hovered at the entrance, staring into the gutted ruins of the building. My stomach churned. I didn't want to go in there.

But fuck, to come all this way—again—only to turn back without stepping foot back in there? I tried to imagine what I'd say to Anchor when she asked what I'd found. Could I really go back to the camp and tell her I'd *had a bad feeling*, so I didn't even go in? This was the Wastes. If you

weren’t having a bad feeling about a place, you weren’t being very smart. My instinct for this kind of stuff had kept me alive over the years, so I was reluctant to ignore it now, but…

Fear cramped my stomach at the thought of Anchor’s face hardening if I told her I hadn’t even bothered looking for anything that might point to what had happened to Cat. I wouldn’t be able to lie, and I didn’t want to disappoint her.

Goddamnit.

I blew out a long, silent breath and grabbed the pipe gun I’d borrowed from Rig before setting out this morning. I licked my lips behind my mask and took a tentative step into the building.

It was silent.

I started to sweat when I noticed long drag marks through the soot and ash on the ground. I knew they weren’t from us, because I could still see the outlines of our boots and One’s distinct footprint closer to the wall. Even through my mask, I could detect a faint sulphurous smell hanging heavy in the air, like fog.

My heart was hammering so hard I could feel my pulse jumping in my throat. I kept my eyes trained on the ground so I could watch each step, avoiding anything that might crunch under my boots and staying as silent as possible. It was harder than I’d thought. There was broken glass and debris all over the floor, and my heart spasmed with fear when I accidentally stepped on a tiny rock that dragged over the ground under my boot.

I cringed and froze, ears straining. Nothing happened. I stared at the opposite wall, trying to work out if the dark, oily smear I could see there was blood or another fluid. My palms were sweating inside my gloves as I clutched Rig’s pipe gun.

When everything remained still and silent a minute later, I exhaled a shaky breath and started walking again. I noticed more of that dark substance on the far wall, leading toward the staircase I’d been approaching when Rig had found One, so I headed in the opposite direction.

This felt so pointless. This building was gargantuan. How the hell did Anchor expect me to find anything that might have led us to Cat in here? We didn’t even know if he’d *been* here. If it was even the military that had got him.

She was losing sight of reality in her relentless quest to find him. I could understand the desperation. I’d be the same if Rig went missing. But I was

struggling to work out what she was actually expecting me to do here. And because I never wanted to piss her off, I hadn't asked.

What was I even looking for?

I eyed the hallway that I knew led to the staircase—the one I'd been about to descend when Rig had stumbled across One. There was no way in hell I was going down there. I just needed to do a cursory sweep, try and grab some stuff from Rig's list, then get the hell out of here.

With that thought driving me forward, I made my way down the hallway until I came across a corridor lined with doors that bore names. *Lt Bratton. Lt Mallory. Cpt Hamish.* I picked one at random and eased the door open quietly. The room inside looked largely untouched, like this part of the building had somehow remained unscathed from the wrath of the beasties. Maybe it had just been empty when they'd got free, so they'd had no need to ravage it.

There was a big, sleek monitor on a large wooden desk, the computer tucked underneath beside a worn leather chair. A small bookcase was wedged in the corner beside another leather armchair and a dead plant. Even though a small voice in the back of my head was telling me it was pointless, I grabbed a couple of books on military tactics and shoved them in my bag to add to Cat's collection, sadness piercing me. I knew I wasn't going to find anything about Cat here. And I knew I'd never see him again. He'd never get to read any new books. But I stuffed them in my bag anyway.

Exhaling quietly, I rounded the desk and eased open the top drawer. An old-fashioned banker's lamp sat beside the black-screened monitor, the emerald of its glass shade reminding me of the sheen on One's wings when they caught the light. I looked away, down into the drawer, which held nothing but a cigar box, a cigar cutter and a heavy-duty lighter. I pulled out the box and opened it, taking the two cigars left in there and shoving them in my bag along with the cutter and lighter.

I opened the next drawer, finding a half-empty bottle of expensive-looking scotch. I made a face even as I stuffed it in my bag. What the hell had they even been doing here? Sitting in their cushy offices, drinking good booze and smoking fat cigars while the rest of the country starved? Assholes.

The third drawer produced documents addressed to Cpt Hamish, and I saw the words *specimen programme* on one of them as I hurriedly rifled

through the pages. I wondered if that referred to the monsters they'd kept here. I stuffed the papers in my bag and moved on to the last drawer.

This one held a stack of box magazines for what looked like a pistol, but no gun. I took the ammo anyway and hefted my considerably heavier bag back over my shoulders. After another cursory look around, I stepped back into the hallway and slunk along the wall to the next office, ears pricked for any little sound.

The next room was trashed. The frosted glass in the door was smashed, and the contents of the room had been ransacked. I stepped inside carefully, avoiding the shattered glass, and froze when I saw a black loafer sticking out from behind the desk. Swallowing, I took a tiny step to the left, along the wall of the room, and let out a little puff of air when a leg became visible. The black slacks had ridden up, and I could see a black dress sock clinging onto grey, withered skin. Old, flaking brown blood was spattered up the leg of the desk.

I looked away quickly, not wanting to see any more. My eyes snagged on a coat hook in the corner of the room, a black coat hanging there. I pictured the ragged, ruined coat One had been wearing.

Fidgeting with guilt, my eyes darted over to the leg sticking out from behind the desk as I took a step closer to the coat rack. It felt wrong, to take this guy's stuff when his… corpse was still in the room. But, well, One could make better use of this than he could. And besides, maybe this guy had been involved in One's capture and torture. Maybe he'd been a total piece of shit.

I grabbed the coat and rolled it into a tight ball, stuffing it in my bag as I backed quickly out of the room. I winced when I stepped on a piece of glass, but the building remained silent.

Suddenly, I was wondering what else I could scavenge for One. He'd need a new shirt and pants, but I doubted I'd be able to get those here. I slipped back down the corridor, mind churning as I tried to think of the areas I'd pass on the way back to the camp. Were there any stores that still had clothing in them? Last time I'd gone on a run for new clothes, I'd gone to—

I froze when movement out of the corner of my eye stopped me dead in my tracks. Gripping Rig's gun, I turned my head and darted my gaze over the wall of metal lockers to my right, a section of them caved in, like something had been thrown against them with great force. A flash of

burnished red closer to the ceiling made my heart stop for a second, but when my eyes flew up, I almost let out a relieved chuckle.

The squirrel stared back at me, nose twitching as it weighed up its options. Its little front paws were spread wide on the top locker, as though it had been caught in the middle of doing something it shouldn't. My mouth quirked into a tiny, lopsided smile behind my mask. I took a step toward the area Rig and I had found One in, thinking I'd give it a quick sweep, and the squirrel somehow stilled even more, beady black eyes following me.

I was about to look away and leave it to whatever it was doing in here, when its ears pricked. I eyed it as its little head came up, tail twitching. A weird sense of foreboding settled over me, even before the squirrel quivered in obvious fear and skittered along the tops of the lockers before jumping down.

I jolted when it raced past, no longer afraid of me, and into the room I'd been about to enter. My heart started thumping harder, sickly dread settling in my gut. I could hear the squirrel's tiny claws scraping frantically over the concrete floor, scrabbling up the side of something metal. Something fell to the ground with a small crash, making me jump out of my skin.

My blood went cold when a sudden flurry of sound echoed up from the bowels of the gutted building. A startled snort, discordant and loud and somehow bloodthirsty, like the thing making the sound was already wondering if whatever had disturbed it could be eaten.

Fuck.

My scalp prickled, and I went hot and cold all over. In the sudden silence, I didn't want to move. I was convinced that whatever had just made that sound, floors beneath me, would be able to hear the frantic pounding of my heart. Would be able to smell the fear running hot and sharp through my blood.

I took a single step back, toward the long, wide hallway that led to the building entrance. I didn't make a sound, but my lips clamped tight behind my mask when another loud snuffle drifted up, this one somehow more excited.

Black spots danced in my vision. Whatever was down there was awake now. Aware something was up here. The fear flooding my veins wasn't natural—it wasn't rooted in long-buried instincts from our caveman days. It was the exact opposite of that. I knew this was something that wasn't from our world. I *knew* it. The thing making those noises, the thing that was

becoming aware of my presence, was something alien and terrifying and fuck I had to *move*, or it was going to get me—

My vision whited out with terror when a horrifying wail rose up from the depths of the building, rabid and distorted like some demon or ghost from an old horror story. Chills cascaded over my scalp and down my spine, cold sweat prickling my forehead and my underarms. Panicking, I stumbled back a few steps, then cursed internally when I stepped on something that crunched. The sound wasn't loud, but it didn't matter. Whatever was down there already knew I was here, and it wanted me.

I jumped out of my skin when a loud crash echoed up, followed by another. The thing screeched again, the sound wet and excited and raw, like a human who'd been screaming in agony for hours. I could hear the thump of too many legs running up metal stairs, tripping in its haste to get to me.

I turned and ran, almost stumbling myself as sheer, panicked terror drove me forward. I could hear the contents of the whisky bottle swishing in my bag, feel the glass neck digging into my back through the nylon fabric. My heart spasmed when the sounds behind me got louder, the echoes closer. The thing chasing me had almost reached my floor.

I could see the door. The beams of sunlight flooding in from outside drove me to run faster, as if I'd be safer when I got out of the building, even though I knew that wasn't true.

I had seconds to decide whether to keep running or try my luck finding a car outside that I could drive. The odds of finding one with the keys close by like we had before were insanely low, but there was nothing for miles around here. Nothing for me to hide in or climb up or squeeze through to get out of reach of the monster chasing me. If it was faster than me, or had more stamina than me, it wouldn't take long for it to catch up.

And it was fast. I could tell that it was *already* catching up with me. I could hear it getting closer, grunting and snorting with excitement at the sight of its prey. I could feel its rabid eyes fixed on my back.

I burst through the doors, panting wildly behind my mask, and took less than a split second to pick a direction before I broke into another sprint. But even as I headed for the nearest car, I knew I wouldn't have time. It was already outside behind me. If I stopped for even a second it would be on me.

Please don't let me die today, I thought as I ran past the car, my blood pounding in my ears, almost blocking out the wet, hungry sounds of the

thing chasing me. That insatiable human curiosity made me want to look back and see what it was, what I was up against, but it would slow me down too much.

I just kept running. Until my lungs were burning and my legs were weak.

I made it out of the base, past the abandoned watch towers and towering barbed wire fence, into the empty, flat prairie that stretched for miles, making me want to cry in despair. The thing was still behind me, but somehow, I was keeping ahead of it. I had to keep running or I'd die.

Sheer adrenaline kept me going, but I knew it wouldn't last forever. Eventually my body would give up—would tell me it had had enough. I'd been in that situation before, but I'd always been able to find somewhere to hide. There was nowhere to hide out here.

At least I was running in the right direction. I tried to think of the nearest buildings or shelters from here on the way back to the base, and all I could picture was a lone farmhouse I'd noticed in the far distance but never actually gone to. It was still at least an hour's walk away. I didn't know if I could run for that long.

The thing behind me let out another hideous, distorted wail that sounded so close that my scalp went numb with terror. I forced my legs to move faster, and when a heavy boom shook the ground beneath my boots, a tiny, breathless whimper escaped my lips.

Another boom, making my stomach tremble. I didn't turn around. I didn't know what the thing was doing—was it throwing something at me?—but I couldn't afford to look. Suddenly, there was a series of booms that shook the ground, getting closer and faster, and then a shadow slid over me, blocking out the sun.

My breath caught in my throat, instinct making me ache to look back, but I didn't. I kept running, even when I heard a high-pitched shriek of agony from the thing that had been chasing me, followed by a wet *smack* that ended with a distorted grunt and a thud.

Jesus, what the hell was happening back there? I was desperate to look, especially as I could hear the sounds getting fainter. The thing wasn't chasing me anymore—I was gaining distance between us. My lungs burned, dry mouth aching from my panting breaths. I knew if I slowed down even for a second, my legs would turn to jelly.

But when I heard another shriek of indignant rage from the thing, even further away now, followed by an impossibly deep grunt and another *smack*… I had to. I had to look.

Slowing to a jog, I peered back over my shoulder, clutching the straps of my backpack to try and stop it jostling so much. My footsteps stuttered, then stopped, and I turned around fully to gape at the sight in front of me.

The thing that had been chasing me looked… almost like a squid, but its tentacle-like legs were solid, like they had bones—sturdy enough to walk and run on. Between the huge, bulbous eyes that sat under its long mantle was a beak—not small and hidden within its tentacles like squids from this world, but a massive white protuberance that was fringed with little teeth.

And it was snapping at the monster fighting it, which was frighteningly tall. The other monster towered over the squid thing, its arms so long they dragged over the ground. It lifted one of those arms, covered in pale hair, and batted the squid monster back.

But the squid monster grabbed onto the other beastie's wrist, and I realised its tentacle arms had suckers. Huge ones. Even through the fur, it latched onto the tall beastie, and I heard a nauseating, wet tearing sound. My eyes bulged out of my head when the squid thing degloved the tall monster's hand, loosing a terrifying, distorted bark of laughter as it brought the glove of skin to its beak and gobbled it up.

I was going to throw up. Bile rose in my throat, and as the tall monster roared in pain and swung a huge fist of raw, red meat and tendons at the squid thing's bulbous mantle, I turned and stumbled away.

I got a fresh burst of adrenaline in the face of that horror, and I just kept running until I could no longer hear the sounds of the two monsters fighting. I kept seeing those suckers deglove that monster's hand on repeat in my head, my stomach roiling at the thought of what might have happened if it had caught me. Would it have peeled the skin from my body while I was alive? How long would I have survived that before pain, or shock, or blood loss killed me?

A flood of overwhelming rage washed over me, making my aching limbs tingle. I gritted my teeth behind my mask. I'd nearly died for some goddamn whisky and cigars. For *nothing*. I didn't care how much I hated disappointing Anchor. I didn't care about the fear of no longer being useful. I wasn't coming back here, no matter how much she wanted me to. Cat

wasn’t fucking here, and even if he had been, he was long gone now. Dead or taken somewhere else.

I was done risking my life for a ghost. Not even the irony of that thought could chase away my anger as I ran.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

By the time I felt safe enough to stop running, the sky was turning dark and grey, heavy clouds slowly drifting overhead. I'd tentatively approached the farmhouse a while ago, but there'd been too many signs of something living in there at some point, so I hadn't risked it. I wasn't going to make the same mistake twice in one day.

I was walking in a daze, trying to zone out and not think about how much farther I had to go before I got back to the camp. My chest heaved with a great sigh when the rain started. Light at first, it made me shiver as the cold droplets slipped down the back of my neck. My shoulders ached from my backpack bouncing on my back as I'd run, and the barrel of Rig's gun was digging into my hip.

Then the skies opened, and the rain came down in a sheet. My hair was plastered to my face within seconds, clothes soaked through. The sound was thunderous, drowning out all else, and as I tucked my chin down to keep the rain out of my eyes, I shivered hard as freezing cold drops poured down the back of my neck under my coat.

I trudged on, sheer determination to get to some form of shelter before it got fully dark the only thing keeping me going. I was exhausted from running for so long—after hours and hours of walking to the base in the first place—and my legs trembled, aching, the muscles getting even stiffer in the cold rain.

It was another hour before I got to the gas station in the middle of nowhere. The rain hadn't let up once, and the sky was considerably darker now. At least I was well past the cave where we'd rested before with One, thanks to how far I'd run. But I was still worried about what might come across me. I was *always* worried about that, but how close I'd come to meeting my end with a monster in the past few days—more than once—meant the fear was a drumbeat in my chest, making me tense and jittery. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to sleep, but holing up for the night was still preferable to walking through the dark.

The gas station was empty, but not particularly safe. All the windows had been busted, and the front door was warped so that it wouldn't stay

closed. I stepped inside, relieved to be out of the relentless rain. It wasn't any warmer in here and I was already soaked through, but still.

Shelves had been toppled, and they were all basically bare aside from useless items like magazines that were twenty years out of date and lottery tickets behind the counter. I wasn't here for supplies, anyway. I was just here to stay alive long enough to keep walking when it got light again, so I made my way through the small, silent store, dirt and debris crunching softly under my wet boots. The steady drip of rainwater from my hair and clothes was the only other sound inside as I peered cautiously into the tiny manager's office at the back of the store. It was equally as ransacked, but blessedly empty. I stepped inside and shut the door, then grabbed the filing cabinet and dragged it over to block the entrance.

The room felt claustrophobic and was almost dark, the only light coming from a tiny, dirty window on the far wall. I eased my gun and backpack off, setting them beside me as I sank to the floor in the corner of the room, behind the desk and out of sight of the window.

Every part of me ached. I pulled my gas mask down wearily, leaving it around my neck as I took out my bottle and had a small sip of water. I'd unscrewed it and let it fill back up with rainwater outside as I'd walked, so that was something at least. I remembered the scotch I'd lifted from the base and was almost tempted to take a long swig, just to take the edge off. But it wasn't worth it. If I had to run again, I needed a clear head.

I tried not to sink too far into a black mood as I ate the pemmican Bo had made for me. It was good, and I tried to work out what meat he'd used for this batch, latching on to any kind of distraction as I sat alone in the dark in an abandoned store. Pemmican stayed good for so long, it could have been months or even years old, so it wasn't necessarily made from the rabbits Lilac had caught recently. I wondered if maybe it was duck.

When my stomach was full enough, I got settled in my chosen corner of the room, crossing my arms over my chest and leaning my head back against the wall with a heavy sigh. I closed my eyes, listening to the thundering sound of the rain outside. At least the tiny window in here was still intact, so the room was slightly warmer.

The hard floor was distractingly uncomfortable under my ass. I shifted in a fruitless attempt to find a decent position, but it didn't exist. Giving up, I wrapped my arms around my knees and clasped my fingers together, trying to stop shivering through sheer will. It didn't work. My clothes were

soaked through, and even the tiniest movement made the freezing fabric stick to my skin.

It was a long night.

I was a miserable, congested mess when I stumbled through the camp's shipping container entrance the next day. My throat ached, and it hurt to swallow. I muffled a cough against my elbow as I made my way through the container maze, but the sound still echoed off the metal interior.

The relief that coursed through me when I stepped into the camp was immeasurable, no matter how shitty I felt. The sun was back out today, and my clothes had only recently gotten completely dry on the walk back. Inside the perimeter, the sunlight shone down in dappled waves on rejuvenated grass that I wished I could smell, but my mask prevented most of it and the congestion in my nose did the rest.

It was quiet in the main part of the camp, everyone off doing their designated jobs. I should have gone and let Anchor know I was back, but I couldn't face it just then. I dragged myself to my door and fumbled to get my key from my bag, exhausted. My head felt cloudy and too heavy. As much as I hated attention, part of me kind of wished Rig would hear me at my door and come see me. Then maybe he'd offer to look after me, because I felt like death, and I couldn't remember the last time anyone had looked after me.

I heard the faint sound of one of the hens clucking in the little yard behind my room. I knew I should really go check on them, but I'd put down feed and water before I'd left the day before, and I'd slipped my yard key and a note under Lilac's door, asking him to check on them while I was gone. I trusted that he'd done it, so they'd be fine for a little longer.

I cursed weakly when I dropped my keys, tiredness making me clumsy. I couldn't help but groan as I leaned down to pick them up.

"You're back."

The quiet voice made me jump as I straightened, and when I turned my head and saw One standing there at his open door, my stomach lurched at the sight of him. He had one long-fingered hand resting on the door jamb, keeping most of the weight off his splinted leg.

“I—what?” I was flustered, and it only got worse when it finally registered that he’d actually spoken. “Yes,” I said quickly, even though he obviously hadn’t been expecting an actual answer. “I… um, how are you?”

I cringed internally at the lame question. God, why couldn’t he have waited until I’d at least been able to sit down for five minutes?

One’s big, black eyes looked endless as they searched my face, and my breath caught when he took a hesitant, limping step closer to me. “You don’t look well.”

I winced. Well, if that wasn’t code for ‘you look like shit’. I tried to clear my throat, but it felt thick and swollen. I ignored the urge to reach up and fuss with my hair, which always got a weird curl in it from the rain. “Got caught in the rain and couldn’t get dry.” I clutched the straps of my backpack tighter in my fist, holding it at my side. “It’s just a cold. I’ll be fine.”

My words seemed to have the opposite effect of what I’d intended. A mildly panicked look struck One’s features, and he took another limping step closer. “Shall I get Rig—”

“No!” I flushed. Now that One was here, I didn’t want Rig’s loud mouth interrupting this. Besides, if his nosy ass hadn’t come out by now while we were standing right outside his door, I was guessing he wasn’t in his room.

“I’m fine,” I told One, offering him a smile, hoping he’d be able to see it in my eyes seeing as I was still wearing my mask. “I just need to sleep and get warm—” The coughing fit that interrupted my words negated them somewhat.

One took another cautious step closer and reached out. I froze, my breath hitching with anticipation, but he mistook it for something else. He pulled his hand back and hunched away. “I’m sorry.”

“No,” I blurted quickly, shaking my head. “I wasn’t—”

Another damn coughing fit. I turned my head away and coughed into my elbow, my throat raw and my head pounding. I knew I needed to go inside and rest, but… One was here. He’d come to see me. And he was *talking*.

His voice was as low and soft as I remembered. Gentle. I wanted to close my eyes and just listen to him speak.

“How’s your leg?” I asked instead, gesturing at the splint. “You should be resting.”

“So should you,” One said quickly, making me want to smile. He hesitated again, then asked, “Can I help you into your room?”

The ache in my throat had nothing to do with being sick in that moment. I nodded, swallowing, even though I wasn't actually going to let him support my weight or take my bag. I pushed open my door and stepped inside, then held it open, waiting for One.

He limped in cautiously a moment later. Our eyes met when he stepped past me, and for a long moment neither of us seemed able to look away. One reluctantly averted his gaze as he made his way deeper into the room. I could hear the rasp of his wings dragging over the floor.

I shut the door quietly. My stomach was jumpy with nerves, and I momentarily forgot how crappy I felt. I put Rig's gun down carefully by the door, then walked over to my table and dumped my backpack before shrugging out of my coat. At least it was dry now. I pulled off my gloves, dropping them on the table too, and stretched out my fingers.

One hovered uncertainly for a few moments before pulling out the chair at the table and sitting down, stretching his splinted leg out in front of him. His wings settled either side of the seat, the ruined strips of membrane on his damaged one fluttering for a moment before they settled.

I licked my lips nervously before I reached up to take off my mask. One's eyes tracked the movement intently. Something flared in them when I pulled the mask away and rubbed self-consciously at the line I knew it had left over the bridge of my nose.

One stared at my mouth for a moment, making me even more nervous, before his gaze flicked up to meet mine. His head twitched and he quickly looked away, down at his hands.

"Um." I cast about in desperation for something to say. "So you're feeling better? You…" I gestured weakly in his direction. "You seem to be," I finished in a lame tone.

One nodded. "Yes." His voice was soft. "Thank you. I…" His head was bowed, but I saw his dark brows pull together in a brief frown. "I'm sorry for acting strangely. Before."

"You weren't," I said quickly. "I'm sure it was all… a shock. And I can't imagine what you've… I'm sorry." I flushed. "I'm guessing you'd rather not talk about it. I'm not trying to make you remember."

That made One look back up at me, and my stomach clenched when he smiled. "I know. And I feel better today. My mind is… clearer."

"That's great." I stared at him, unable to tear my eyes away. "Do you—um… did Rig keep you company yesterday?"

“Yes. He showed me the showers so I could get clean. And we washed my clothes.”

He gestured down at himself, and I let my gaze wander greedily over his long, lean body. His clothes did look cleaner, but they were still pretty ragged. I suddenly remembered the coat I’d grabbed for him, balled up in my bag. I opened my mouth to tell him, but then eyed his wings. I’d need to modify it first. I decided to wait and show him after I’d done that.

“That’s good.” I nodded, picking nervously at a hangnail on my thumb. My voice was hoarse, and my throat was getting even more sore the longer we spoke, but I didn’t want to end the conversation. I didn’t want One to go.

But he must have noticed. “You need to rest.” He made to get up, and I hurriedly took a step closer.

“No, I’m okay,” I said quickly. “I just… I don’t mind if you stay. I actually…” I paused, flushing. Something about One’s soft presence made the admission escape. “I don’t really want to be on my own right now. If that’s okay.” My face burned.

One looked at me, his eyes calm and steady. Some of the nervous energy in me settled, and I forced myself to take a deep breath through my mouth, my nose completely blocked.

One nodded. “I’ll stay if you get into bed.”

My face got even hotter, and I quickly looked away. “Okay,” I said in an embarrassingly shy voice as I sat on the edge of the bed and reached down to unlace my boots.

I could feel One watching me as I pulled off my boots. I really wanted to strip off these clothes. They felt wrong and stiff after getting soaked then drying again while I was still wearing them, but there was no way in hell I was getting half-naked in front of One.

Feeling awkward, I climbed into bed and settled my head on the cool pillow. Despite how weird the situation was, my body practically melted the moment I was under the covers. I knew if I shut my eyes, I wouldn’t be able to open them again for a while. My head throbbed, throat sore and nose blocked.

“Did something happen?” One asked me in his low, soothing voice. The chair creaked as he sat forward, black eyes watching me steadily.

I licked my dry lips and swallowed, wishing I’d grabbed my water bottle before getting into bed. “Yes,” I heard myself admitting, even though I

normally just lied when Anchor or Rig asked. “Something had… There was something in the military base.”

One’s eyes flared. “Did you see it?”

I nodded, my cheek brushing the soft, worn fabric of my pillowcase. “It chased me.”

“What did it look like?”

I shuddered. “Kind of like a squid.” I realised One might not know what that was. “Um, it had arms that were almost like tentacles, and a big, long mantle. Bulging eyes and a huge beak. Its skin was like… mottled, blue-ish purple. Looked wet. It made this…” I shuddered. “Horrible screeching, wailing sound.”

I saw One’s long fingers curl into a loose fist on the arm of the chair. “A karik. They’re awful.” He gazed at me, eyes big and liquid. “Are you hurt?”

I shook my head. “I managed to outrun it, and then another beastie came along and started fighting it.” I shuddered hard at the memory of that squid creature degloving the other monster’s hand. “God, it was…” I stopped myself.

One leaned forward more, black eyes burning. “You shouldn’t go out there, Ghost.”

Pleasure swelled in my chest at the sound of him saying my name. Well, my raider name at least. I tried to play it off, shrugging one shoulder. “It’s fine. Someone has to.”

“Why does it always have to be you?”

I didn’t like how uncomfortable the question made me. “I don’t mind,” I said automatically. “It’s dangerous. I’m used to it now. I know what I’m doing.”

“Yes, you’re right. It’s dangerous.” One’s gaze was unwavering. “So why should it be only you putting yourself in danger?”

“Others leave the camp too,” I protested weakly. “To get water and hunt. I’m just the one who… I’m fast. I know my way around here. I don’t mind,” I repeated, but it sounded flat even to my own ears.

One stared at me a moment longer, then sat back with a surprisingly stern frown marring his beautiful face. “Well, you can’t go anywhere for a while.” He gestured at me with one long, pale hand. “You must get better first.”

“Yeah,” I croaked, then licked my dry lips. “But I don’t think I’ll be able to read to you again for a few days,” I added, trying to make my tone light-

hearted, but my voice was too hoarse and pathetic for it to work.

One gazed at me with big, liquid eyes. “I will read to you instead,” he said, a thread of fierce determination in his soft voice.

“Oh.” My breath caught in my throat, making me cough. “You don’t—you don’t have to,” I spluttered between coughs, my face getting hot with embarrassment.

One stood up abruptly, wobbling only a little on his splinted leg. “I’m going to get a book. I’ll be back. Do you need water?”

I nodded gratefully and pointed to my bag with one hand while the other covered my mouth. “In my bag.”

He handed it to me before limping out of the room. I took a long gulp, closing my eyes as the water momentarily soothed the fire in my throat. With One’s soft yet overwhelming presence gone from the room, I felt miserable again. There was an old box of tissues in my nightstand—for other reasons—and I used one to blow my nose for twenty seconds straight.

By the time One came back, I was shivering under the covers, curled up in a pathetic ball. Instead of sitting back in the chair by the table, he carefully lowered himself beside the bed so that his back was against my nightstand. His undamaged wing brushed the bedframe, and my fingers itched to reach out and touch it as I stared at it through bleary, burning eyes.

“Is this alright?” One asked me, voice quiet. “I can move away if—”

“No,” I said quickly, cheeks hot. “This is good. Fine. As long as you’re comfortable.”

One nodded as he turned his head to smile at me. My stomach tightened with pleasant nerves as I realised how close we were. The dark lines that fanned out from his temples like starbursts were raised, and I wondered if I’d be able to feel them beneath my fingertips. His skin was ghoulishly white, but this close I could see a sickly, pale-green tinge to it that somehow suited him. His black-green hair was clean now, falling to his pointed chin in delicate, loose waves. It looked soft.

My eyes dipped to his lips. They were pale, and as I stared, One’s smile slowly dropped. A second later, his tongue darted out to wet his lips, and my gut clenched at the sight.

His tongue was black.

And forked.

My brain blanked while my body had a bewildering reaction, my cock twitching in my pants as it started to get hard.

“Um…” I had no idea what I was trying to say, or why I was trying to say anything at all. My face burned as I tore my gaze away from One’s mouth.

He turned his head to look down at the book in his hands. “I thought we could carry on with the one you were reading me.” He held it up and shot me a small smile. “I read one of the others while I waited for you.”

While he’d waited for me. Like he’d actually felt the lack of my presence. I sometimes wondered if the others even noticed when I was gone from camp. Something hot and sweet pierced me, making my body soften. I smiled at him, and saw his gaze drop to my mouth much like mine had done to his. “That sounds nice.”

After a moment, One looked back at the book and opened it up at where I’d folded over the corner of the page. I said another mental apology to Cat at the sight, but didn’t dare breathe a word out loud as I waited to hear One’s low voice read to me.

My body relaxed into the bed when he started reading a moment later. I closed my eyes so I could focus entirely on his voice. If this was what my voice sounded like to him—this soothing—then I understood why he’d liked listening to me speak. This was heaven.

I tried valiantly to stay awake as One read to me, but my head was too clogged, and my body had been pushed well past its limits. I fell asleep far too quickly, one hand stretched out on the bed toward the monster reading to me in his soft, sweet voice.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Even though I was exhausted, my sleep was fitful and feverish. I was too hot, sweating in my clothes when I half woke up at some point. I moaned, frowning even with my eyes still closed, and could have sworn I felt long, cool fingers on my flushed cheek. I sighed in relief, trying to burrow into the soothing touch, but then it was gone.

When I woke up again, the light in the room had shifted. I blinked blearily, trying and failing to breathe through my stuffy nose. My mouth was dry and cottony, and my eyes felt gritty when I reached up and rubbed one.

"Ghost." I jumped a little, then relaxed again when I pulled my hand away and saw One still sitting beside my bed, his head turned toward me.

"Sorry I fell asleep." My voice was hoarse, half gone. I swallowed thickly, wincing when it felt like I'd gulped down a razorblade.

"Drink some water." One was gently pushing my bottle into my hands. I struggled up onto one elbow and took a sip, trying not to spill it. When I was done, he took it back, and I shivered as our fingers brushed.

"You don't have to stay here," I croaked. "I know what I said before, but __"

"I want to stay." One smiled at me, resting his head against the edge of my nightstand as he looked at me. A lock of dark hair fell over his sharp, burn-scarred cheekbone, and my fingers itched to reach out and smooth it back behind his misshapen ear.

Instead, I stared at him in silence, and he stared back. After a long moment, I heard myself asking, "Why did you not like me?" I flushed at how juvenile the question sounded. "I mean when we first found you—you seemed to… react badly to me, but not to Rig."

This time, it was One who flushed, a delicate colour washing over his prominent cheekbones. He looked away and licked his lips, and my gaze snagged on that black, forked tongue again.

"I was ashamed." My eyes snapped back up at his words. "The thought of you seeing me like that; bound and weak and helpless." He shook his head, looking down so his hair covered his face in a soft, jewel-toned sweep.

“You were injured, and you’d been tortured,” I said fiercely, my throat on fire as my voice grated. “You’re not weak.”

But his words made me consider something that had been niggling at the back of my brain, and I found myself asking before I could stop the question. “But I don’t understand why… if you’re strong enough to have built our camp’s wall on your own… why hadn’t you broken out of those chains?”

One exhaled, still looking down at his hands so I couldn’t see his face. Eventually, he turned his head to look at me again. His eyes were big and soft and sad.

“My kind are… we abhor violence. We try not to hurt others, even if they are hurting us.”

I couldn’t help it. I frowned. “What, even if you’re being held captive and tortured?” I shook my head. “I’m sorry, but—”

“I know it’s hard to understand,” One interrupted, giving me a sad smile. “But I am…” He hesitated, then reached up and tapped his scarred temple. “My mind is different to yours, Ghost. Pain inflicted on myself… I can handle it. It’s not enough to make me want to hurt others.”

“Alright, fine.” I couldn’t understand his mindset whatsoever, but I supposed it wasn’t my place to question it. Especially not when I barely had enough brain power to be holding this conversation. “But getting free of your chains—that wouldn’t have hurt anyone.”

One shook his head, exhaling softly. “No, but my head was… It felt fractured.” His voice was distant, like he was remembering what it had been like. “My mind is already crowded and after so long in that place, in that cell, I… struggled to think clearly.”

His head twitched hard, then again, and my chest ached. “I’m sorry that happened to you,” I told him, my fingers curling with their desire to reach out and touch him. I winced as I swallowed, throat sore. “But I still don’t… Why were you ashamed for *me* to see you, but not Rig? I don’t understand.”

One went still, then slowly turned his head to look at me. We stared at each other for a long moment. When he licked his lips again, my stomach tightened.

“I don’t know,” One admitted eventually, his voice soft. “I heard your voice and it… cut through everything else—through all the noise in my head. It sounded… important.”

Jesus. My eyes threatened to water as I stared at him. No one had ever said anything like that to me before. Like I… mattered so much. Like my very presence affected them in such a way.

My heart raced, pounding hard in my chest. I swallowed, ignoring the sharp slice of pain in my throat. “One…”

I stopped and quickly propped myself up on my elbow when I realised there was something else he could tell me now. “Wait… what’s your real name?”

After a moment, One’s face broke into a huge, beautiful grin, and I knew that was it. I was utterly smitten. Totally, one hundred percent gone for this strange, winged monster with creepy black eyes and ghostly, green-tinged skin.

“Aury,” he said.

His smile was joyful and infectious, and I felt my mouth curling up even though I still felt like total shit. “Aury,” I repeated, trying to say it just as he had—*ow-ree*.

When I said it, Aury’s eyes flared with a strange, soft inner light for a split second. “Yes.” He nodded, his voice almost desperately eager. He leaned closer, one long-fingered hand hovering in the air before it curled over the edge of the mattress. His smile turned a little rueful. “I haven’t heard anyone say it in so long.”

God, he was killing me. “Aury,” I repeated, more confidently, and smiled when Aury grinned again, showing off his even, white teeth. “It’s… I like it,” I told him, feeling shy. I wanted him to keep smiling like that.

Then I ruined it by breaking into a coughing fit, only just managing to turn my face away and bury it in the crook of my elbow in time so I didn’t cough in Aury’s face. My face went hot with embarrassment, but I was so relieved when it finally ended that I just collapsed back onto the bed with a groan.

I heard Aury let out a little sympathetic noise. “Poor Ghost.” His wings made a rasping sound against the side of the mattress as he shifted. “I will go and get you some food. You need to eat.”

I panicked, shaking my head. I didn’t want him to leave. It felt like if he stepped out of the room, the fragile little bubble we were in would pop, and all the things we’d shared would dissipate. “I’m okay,” I said. “I can—”

“Ghost?” I jumped as Rig’s loud voice cut through the still quiet inside my room. He pounded on the door a second later. “That you coughing up

your guts in there? Why didn't you tell me you were back?"

My eyes met Aury's, and he gave me a regretful little smile, as if he was as sad as I was that our quiet time together was coming to an end. "Do you want me to let him in?" he asked.

I shot him a small smile back. "I suppose we should. But you don't have to get up." I raised my voice and called, "It's unlocked," before breaking into another less intense coughing fit.

The door opened and Rig barrelled into the room, stopping short when he saw Aury sitting on the floor beside the bed. "One," he said, surprise colouring his tone. "Hey. Sorry, I didn't know you were in here."

Rig's brown eyes cut over to me, brows pulling down into a frown. "What's wrong?" he demanded, taking several hurried steps closer to the bed. "Are you okay? What happened? Are you hurt?"

I shook my head. "Just a cold. Got caught in the rain."

Rig visibly relaxed, but he still cast a critical eye over me. "Make sure you rest up. But you're okay otherwise? Did anything happen?"

I could feel Aury's eyes on me.

"No," I said, looking down at my fingers as I made pleats in the fabric of the bottom sheet. "But I… It seemed like there was something in the base so I couldn't stay in there long. I didn't really get anything on your list. Sorry."

"Hey, it's okay." I glanced up to see Rig wave a careless hand as he sat down in the chair Aury had previously occupied. "Nothing essential. No more new beastie friends to bring back this time, huh?" He grinned at Aury. "I kept One company while you were gone, but we didn't do any more reading. Well, not together at least," he added, then waggled his eyebrows at me. "You need to borrow that other book when I'm done with it. Trust me."

I let out a rusty chuckle, then winced at the pain in my throat as I looked at Aury, waiting for him to correct Rig with his real name.

When he didn't, I darted my gaze between them. "Um… Aury." I jerked my chin at the silent monster sitting beside me.

Rig quirked a brow at me. "You what?"

I rolled my eyes. "One's name. It's Aury."

Rig stared at me, then Aury. "Is it?"

When Aury nodded, Rig stared at him for a moment longer, then grinned behind his mask. "Huh. Okay, awesome." His eyes cut back over to me.

“How do you know that?”

I looked at him oddly. “Because he told me?” Aury had spoken the moment I’d gotten back, so I’d just assumed that he had started talking while I was gone.

But Rig looked shocked. “He did?” He looked at Aury again. “You’re… I mean, that’s great. Cool! I’m glad you’re feeling more comfortable, O—Aury.”

He smiled at the monster again, then side-eyed me. Then Aury. Something dawned over his features. I jerked when he smacked his hands on his thighs before heaving his body up out of the chair. “I’m gonna go get you something to eat, my man.” He pointed at me. “Stay in bed. Rest up.”

He looked between me and Aury again. “I’ll probably be a while. Got to speak to Bo about something that needs fixing in the kitchen, so… I’ll be back later.”

I made a face at him when he raised his eyebrows at me as he headed for the door, shooting me a big grin beneath his leather mask. He jerked his chin at Aury, who was looking down at the book in his lap, fiddling with the dog-eared cover, and shot me a thumbs up before slipping out of the room. God, he was *such* a dork.

I attributed the flush on my cheeks to a low-grade fever as I settled back on the bed, my eyes automatically drinking Aury in again. He looked over at me and smiled, holding up the book with a questioning look. “Shall I keep reading?”

I nodded straight away, then hesitated. “You shouldn’t be sitting on the floor with your leg, though.” My face went hot, and I couldn’t believe what I was about to say, but I forced myself to get it out. “You can lie on the bed. If you want. There’s enough room. It’ll be more comfortable.”

Aury watched me silently for a moment before his black eyes flickered to the bed. When he looked back at me, something flashed through his gaze too fast for me to interpret, but it looked almost like… longing. Like what I was feeling was reflected back at me in his eyes, for just a moment.

“Okay,” he said quietly, then moved to get up. I shuffled back under the covers to the other side of the bed, heart hammering as I watched Aury lower himself on top of the covers with care, clutching the book tight. He settled on his side, facing me, and I realised it was probably the comfiest way for him to lie down because of his wings. They hung over the edge of the bed behind him, so big that I knew they’d still be trailing on the floor.

We stared at each other. I wished I hadn’t moved so far over on the bed, because otherwise I could have been closer to him. My cheeks got hot at the creepy thought, but I didn’t look away.

Then Aury smiled at me again, and I felt myself melt like the totally sappy fool I had apparently become.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I stayed holed up in my room for the next few days, using my cold as an excuse to hide away with Aury. I chickened out of speaking to Anchor myself about the base, instead asking Rig to let her know that I couldn't find anything except the crinkled handful of papers I'd stuffed in my bag from the drawer in that office. Maybe she'd find something useful on them. I hadn't even read them.

I gave Rig the booze and the cigars. And even though I'd ultimately nearly died and gotten sick just to give my best friend a decadent evening, I couldn't be angry anymore. Because it meant I got to spend time with Aury.

He stayed with me in my room almost constantly, only leaving that first day when I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer as he read to me. I didn't want him to go, so the next night when it seemed like he was going to leave, I quickly asked him to keep reading. He acquiesced readily, so I didn't think he wanted to leave either. The thought made my stomach churn with pleasant nerves. Like all this time we were spending together was leading to something inevitable, even though I struggled to believe Aury could ever look at me that way.

After that, we were only apart when I went to shower or use the bathroom. Rig brought my meals—and more books—to my room, and occasionally stayed to hang out for a while, but he mostly left us alone. When Aury wasn't reading to me, we talked. I told him about my childhood in the city, and how I'd ended up out here in the Wastes, but they weren't very interesting stories.

His stories were a little more disjointed. Some were vague memories from decades or centuries ago, which blew my mind. Others were sharper, and he could remember every single obsessive detail, like the story he told me about coming through the tear from his world into this one. He said he'd watched the initial rush of monsters pouring through, practically falling over each other to get to the alien new place that had appeared out of nowhere.

He'd gone through alone a while later, stepping into this world when the sky was dark and the moon was big and full. He'd said everything had been bathed in blue, and the air had smelled warm. All around him, he'd been

able to hear the chaotic sounds that had been the soundtrack to those first few weeks of the monster rising. Humans screaming. The excited snarls of the more bloodthirsty monsters going berserk with their new glut of prey. Helicopters droning overhead. Rapid gunfire and distant explosions as the military scrambled to try and take down these new, nightmarish creatures with little luck.

I hadn't asked him too much about his time at the military base, or how he'd gotten captured. I could see the panic rising in him when the military came up in conversation. His breathing would speed up and his tic would return, making his head twitch, which I knew embarrassed him. So, we avoided talking about the military.

I was already far too used to waking up to see Aury lying beside me, either resting with his eyes closed—even though he didn't normally sleep—or rereading one of the books we'd already read together.

It meant I was in a bad mood when, on the fifth morning, I reluctantly got ready to leave my room, putting on my boots and mask. I couldn't hide away forever, as much as I wanted to. Lilac had been looking after the girls for me, but it wasn't fair to make him keep doing it, and I was due several shifts keeping watch up on the camp wall.

I also still had that coat for Aury balled up in my bag that I needed to modify before I gave it to him. I was good at sewing. Most people in the camp tended to come to me to fix tears or sew buttons back on. After days of staring at Aury, I'd come up with ideas to fix the back of the coat to accommodate his wings. But I wanted it to be a surprise, which meant—much as I hated the idea—that I needed some time apart from him to work on it.

I also worried that having Aury hide away with me wasn't doing much to endear him to the rest of the camp. And while I had no idea what his plans were—how long he was going to stay with us—I didn't like the thought of anyone treating him coldly just because he was a beastie.

He probably needed to spend some time outside in the camp, around the others, but just the thought made me nervous. I was protective of him, even though it turned out he wasn't quite as timid as he'd initially seemed when we'd found him at the base. Now that we were used to each other, Aury talked freely to me, his voice low and soft and just… perfect. He smiled at me a lot, and every time my heart beat just a little faster. But he was still

quiet around others, even Rig, although he was slowly getting more used to Rig's louder, brasher personality too.

Aury had already taken the splint off his leg. Apparently, monster genetics meant super-fast healing, because he could already walk on the leg that had been horrifically snapped mid-shin just a week ago. Apollo had been dumbfounded, but when he'd checked Aury's leg over, he'd said it felt and looked good.

Lilac was approaching when Aury and I stepped out of my room and into the cool morning sun. His reaction to seeing the monster come out of my room was nothing more than a tiny quirk of his right brow.

He held out my yard key. "I've seen to them already this morning," he told me.

I thanked him and took the key, my mouth twitching behind my mask. I decided I wouldn't tell Lilac I'd heard him talking softly to the hens this morning through my window, because he'd successfully kept up the cold, unfeeling act on a twenty-four-seven basis over his many years in the camp, but I wasn't so sure I believed it anymore. Or maybe my growing infatuation with the sweet, quiet monster beside me was making me want to see the best in everyone. Honestly, I'd never felt this kind of weird, terrifying intensity in my gut before.

"Anchor wants to speak to you now that you're feeling better," Lilac told me in his flat voice, and a wave of dread rushed through me.

I nodded, my eyes darting briefly over to Aury. I was due on watch, and I planned on fixing Aury's coat while I was sitting up on the camp wall. I was already trying to work out how soon I'd be able to spend time with him again. Probably not until this evening.

"And I was wondering, seeing as… Aury, is it?" Lilac asked, then continued when Aury nodded silently. "Seeing as Aury is going to be at a loose end, do you want to help me in the garden?"

I blinked in shock at Lilac. He was the last person I would have expected to extend a friendly hand to Aury. He kept to himself, even more so than I did, and didn't seem interested in socialising with anyone. Even Rusty, who I was pretty sure he'd slept with several times.

Aury nodded, and I saw him give Lilac a tentative smile. "I'd like that."

"Great." Lilac's voice remained void of emotion, and I knew he wasn't smiling behind his plain black mask as he nodded once at me. "See you later."

I quickly glanced at Aury to say goodbye. He was already looking at me with big, liquid eyes. “Um, I’ll see you later?”

I couldn’t help but phrase it as a question, my anxiety shoving its way to the forefront. Maybe he was sick of me. Maybe he was relieved Lilac had offered him an excuse to get away from me. Maybe he’d just felt obligated to stay with me while I was sick because I’d found him—

Aury nodded, cutting off my spiralling thoughts. “Yes. Please.”

Pleasure pierced through the anxious rock in my gut, and I felt my shoulders relax. “See you later, then.”

I watched Aury and Lilac walk off toward the vegetable patch tucked away in the far corner of the camp. I knew I was mainly stalling before going to see Anchor, but I really did want to make sure Aury was okay to spend a long time on his leg. He was still limping almost imperceptibly, hardly at all anymore, but I worried, nonetheless.

I turned to look at the diner. I knew Anchor would be in there already. I really didn’t want to give her the opportunity to ask me to head back out into the Wastes yet, because my stupid, weak-willed ass wouldn’t be able to say no.

So instead of heading over, I turned and went back into my room to grab my backpack and sewing supplies, then headed to the archway carved into the shipping container. I followed the maze, up ladders Rig had soldered and through hatches we’d made in the metal, until I emerged out the top and straightened up. The view was great up here, and I’d gotten over any fear of heights I may have had years ago.

I turned to peer down into the camp, scanning for Aury. I spotted him easily in the vegetable patch, his big black wings a beacon among the small sea of flourishing green plants. I watched him for a few seconds. Lilac was leading him down the neat rows of crops he’d planted, pointing things out. He was painfully particular about how the crops were cared for, but his efforts kept us well-fed, so no one complained.

Reluctantly tearing my gaze away, I made my way along the wall to where Rusty was sitting, her legs dangling over the edge. That creepy white mask turned up toward me as I approached.

“Relieving you early,” I told her, and she didn’t hesitate to get to her feet.

“Won’t complain about that.” Before walking off, she hesitated. “How’s the beastie? Is it… getting better?”

“He,” I corrected. “And yeah. His leg’s healing up.”

She nodded, the blank face of her mask bobbing. “Some of the others really don’t want him here,” she told me, voice grim. “Just so you know.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I said. “But he’s…” I flushed, concerned about coming across as too gushing. “He really is harmless.”

“Doesn’t look it,” Rusty muttered, then walked off before I could say anything else.

I exhaled, sitting down on the edge of the container and doing a cursory sweep of the horizon. Nothing, not even a wild animal. The day was cool, but the pale blue sky was clear. We were getting closer to winter, though, which meant snow. A lot of it. And while that meant easy access to water, because we could boil the snow, it brought with it far more negatives than positives. Although Rig’s chicken-wire roof over the camp did mean that after an initial dusting, if the snow was thick enough it tended to pile up without falling. It helped to insulate the camp, but meant we lived in weird, glowy darkness for a while unless we left the perimeter.

The months leading up to winter also meant even more trips out to the Wastes for me, to try and scavenge extra supplies before travelling became too hard.

Would Aury still be with us then? I tensed up at the thought of him leaving. Now his leg was healed, maybe he’d want to move on soon. Straight away. Panic clutched at my throat at the thought of looking down and seeing him walking away from the camp. I’d never see him again.

I jerked the zip of my bag down and grabbed the coat from inside, determined to distract myself. This wouldn’t take me long to do. And then even if Aury did leave—when, not if; who was I kidding?—he would have something to remember me by.

The thought just made me feel sadder.

I was sewing the last button onto the back of the coat when movement from the corner of my eye pulled my gaze up. I squinted, trying to work out what I was seeing, but it was still too far away. I glanced back down to snip away the excess thread and shove all my sewing supplies back into their tin. After putting it in my bag, I carefully folded Aury’s new coat and laid that on top, then zipped my backpack shut.

By the time I looked back up, the object was closer. Close enough that trepidation tightened my stomach as I made out shapes. Three big shapes—a large, long vehicle that looked like a bus, and two huge, monstrous forms pulling it. A smaller figure walked beside the slow-moving vehicle, but they were still too far away for me to tell if they were human or beastie.

I pulled on my backpack and got to my feet, staring at the strange procession as I quickly put on my gloves. They were like the final piece of my armour, and I didn't feel comfortable facing anything without them. The vehicle was coming this way, heading straight for the camp, not angling to go around us.

There was another raider at the opposite corner of the camp wall to me, keeping watch in the other direction. I whistled our short, sharp signal that meant someone or something was approaching. The other raider was too far away for me to tell who it was even when they turned around at the sound, and a few other raiders in the camp below stopped and looked up.

"Get Anchor and Lilac," I called down, and saw two of them start running in opposite directions—one toward the diner, the other toward the vegetable patch.

I quickly turned back to watch the procession. They were closer now—close enough for me to make out the grey, non-human tone of the walking figure's skin, and something that glinted in the sun on its head. It was dragging something with a long handle behind it, leaving a deep furrow in the ground. The two monsters pulling what I could now see was an RV were big, lumbering beasts with wrinkly, sand-coloured skin and three long horns protruding from the tops of their heads. I'd seen those kinds of monsters before out in the Wastes, at a distance and usually near forests.

"Ghost."

I turned and saw that it had been Nun who'd been keeping watch up here with me, and she'd jogged around to meet me on my corner. I jerked my chin toward the weird procession.

She squinted, tiny lines fanning out from the corners of her bright blue eyes. Nun was a tall, broad woman with pale blonde hair that she pulled up into a ponytail most of the time. She was a self-taught fletcher, and she fingered the crude crossbow hanging from her hip as she eyed the approaching group.

"What the hell?" she muttered. Only a faint hint of her Swedish accent remained these days. She'd been over here on vacation with her family

when the monsters rose—her mother, father and two younger sisters. None of them had survived the first few weeks.

"I'm going to go down to let Anchor know," I told her as we both watched. They were close enough now that I could make out the drooping eyes of the two big monsters pulling the RV, attached to it with harnesses and chains. The thing glinting on the walking figure's head was some kind of cage.

What the hell was this?

"I'll keep an eye up here," Nun said. She patted her crossbow. "Just give me the signal if you need me to use this."

"I will." I made my way over to the hatch and swung myself down, climbing quickly down the ladder. By the time I emerged out of the containers onto the grass, Lilac and Anchor were striding toward me. I could see Aury watching from a short distance away, Rig beside him, brown eyes anxious.

"Three monsters, two of them pulling an RV," I said shortly.

Anchor's thick brows furrowed. "What?" she said blankly, sounding confused.

I shrugged. "Yeah. No idea."

Lilac walked past me, into the container. "Best find out what they want, then," he said flatly, before vanishing.

I met Anchor's eyes for a moment before we both hurried after him. I pulled my useless shotgun off my back to grip in my hands, wishing I'd grabbed Rig's pipe gun before taking watch. At least that one actually worked.

We emerged into the Wastes and followed Lilac as he made his way around the perimeter to meet the approaching group head-on. He twirled his machete lazily in his hand as he walked, his shoulders and overall gait relaxed. He was so freaking calm, which just unnerved me even more. I tried not to look too twitchy as I clutched my useless gun and followed silently behind.

By the time we got around the perimeter, the RV and the monsters had nearly reached us. I cast my eye over the two lumbering beasts pulling the vehicle. Their eyes were sad, but calm. They didn't appear interested in us at all, but I could see them gazing at the trees behind the camp.

The beastie walking beside the vehicle was far more unnerving. His build was solid and masculine, his bare chest a wall of thick grey muscle,

his right shoulder and bicep bulging as he dragged that long-handled object behind him. It looked like a heavy weapon of some kind, but before I could focus on it, I was distracted by the sunlight glinting dully off the metal encasing his head.

I stared. His head was covered by a cage, with bars so thick and close together I couldn't see a hint of the monster's face beneath, even when he got close enough that his features should have been visible. It was insanely creepy. Then I noticed the harness over his shoulders, and a chain hanging between his back and the side of the RV. A thick ring of metal had been welded to the side to attach the heavy metal chain.

These monsters didn't look like they were here of their own free will.

I heard Anchor exhale a trembling breath from beside me, but I couldn't tear my eyes away as the procession got closer. A rapid clicking sound, like a signal, emerged from the cage enclosing the head of the grey-skinned beastie, and the two big, lumbering monsters slowed to a stop.

I stood shoulder to shoulder with Lilac and Anchor in the ensuing silence, broken only by the gentle rustle of leaves on the nearby trees. The two big beasts shifted their weight lazily on their long arms, eyeing up the trees again.

I could feel the eyes of the grey monster sweeping over us, but he didn't say a word. I gritted my teeth, barely managing to suppress my surprised jump when he swung what I could now see was a huge war hammer up off the ground. It came to rest easily over his shoulder, his posture far too casual to be anything but a subtle threat.

I felt an almost imperceptible tensing of Lilac's frame, his narrow shoulder brushing mine, as the door to the RV swung open, its metallic squeak cutting through the stillness.

A small, sandalled foot appeared on the little metal step, followed by a plump calf and then the swish of a dark skirt. A dainty hand curled around the edge of the door, pulling it closed and revealing the rest of the woman to us. She was short and dressed immaculately in a black dress and dainty pink cardigan, her dark hair brushed and glossy. Her face was plump and pale, lips painted pink.

I stared at her, something like morbid fascination making me unable to pull my gaze away. She looked so out of place. Like a mirage out here in this wasteland littered with the remnants of past civilisations. Beside the towering, silent grey monster, she looked even tinier.

Movement in her arms finally drew my gaze down, and my brows pinched when I saw the small beastie cradled against the woman's chest. It was a thin, bony creature, hairless and the colour of red wine held up to the sun in a glass. Its head was a blank teardrop on its side, a smooth, round skull thinning to a sharp point for a snout. I could just about make out two black eyes that swivelled around excitedly. Its four spindly legs each ended in two tiny claws that reminded me of the tarsal claws on a tarantula, which I'd read about in a book I'd once borrowed from Cat's room.

The woman took a step forward, snapping my attention back to her.

She cast a sharp eye over the three of us, then beyond, at the looming wall of the camp behind us. When she smiled, I couldn't work out if it was meant to be friendly. If it was, she failed.

"Hello, pets," she said in a saccharine, high-pitched voice. "My name's Mary."

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“As if we need anything else.”

Anchor was seething mainly to herself, clutching at her dark curls as she paced the diner. “What the fuck is that?” She stopped abruptly and gestured with a vague hand toward the camp wall, visible through the big windows. “What the hell does that woman want, huh?”

“I don’t know,” I answered nervously, watching as she started pacing again. Lilac lounged back against the wall; arms folded over his chest as he observed with a passive expression on his masked face.

After introducing herself, Mary had said that she simply wanted to stop for a while and let her ‘pets’ rest. She’d waved a careless hand at the tall grey beastie, who’d remained silent and unmoving, before petting the head of the weird little monster in her arms. It had let out a long, wispy rattling sound in response that sent shivers up my spine.

Anchor stopped and let out a little groan, scrubbing knobbly hands roughly over her forehead. “God, I wish Cat was here.” She sounded so much younger than her age in that moment. Afraid and tired.

“We’ll keep an eye on them,” I said to try and make her less stressed. “Double up on keeping watch.”

“For what it’s worth, I don’t think she’s going to do anything foolish like try and storm into the camp,” Lilac said from across the room.

I saw Anchor swallow. “Yeah, but what about that beastie. He looked… mean.”

I wanted to point out that he was chained up, just like the other two big beasties out there. Only the weird little one hadn’t had a chain or harness, but Mary had clearly found a way of domesticating it, if it was happy to be cradled like a baby in her arms. Or maybe it *was* a baby, but if that was the case, had she taken it from its mother?

Why the hell was she surrounding herself with monsters?

Lilac just shrugged. “Guess he might. Guess we’ll see.” His voice was as flat as ever.

I saw the muscles in Anchor’s neck tighten as she clenched her jaw behind her mask. “You better be ready, then, Lilac.”

“I will be.”

Anchor looked like she wanted to argue—like she wanted to pick a fight just to blow off some steam. A vein in her forehead throbbed. I cast about for something to say to alleviate the growing tension—for any way to decrease her rising stress levels. I could practically *feel* her blood pressure climbing.

The door to the diner squeaked as it opened. I turned to see Rig stepping inside, brows pinched in a question. “So, uh… what’s happening?”

“Where’s Aury?” I asked instead of answering, looking past him out of the diner windows.

“He’s gone to his room. I didn’t know what was going on, so…” Rig trailed off, then looked between us all again. “So… what’s going on?”

I looked at Anchor. She exhaled and rubbed at her forehead. “We should probably tell the whole camp.”

“Well, they’re on their way.” Lilac straightened from the wall and jerked his chin toward the window. I turned to see the rest of the camp making their way toward the diner. “I’ll go keep watch with Nun,” Lilac added, slipping out before the others could get inside.

Rig and I stepped to the back of the room, close to the windows, while everyone else filed in. Anchor’s dark eyes sparked with nerves, but she kept her posture straight.

“What’s going on, Anchor?” Rusty asked, her creepy white mask tilting, but it couldn’t hide the anxiety in her voice.

Anchor exhaled. After she briefly explained what had happened—which, truthfully, wasn’t much—the diner fell silent.

“So… what? She has pet monsters?” Apollo asked, sounding confused.

I don’t think they’re pets. I didn’t say it out loud, but surely Anchor would. They’d been chained up. While it may have made sense to have the two big creatures pulling the RV attached to it, the grey-skinned monster was clearly at least human-level intelligent. And he’d been chained up too, being forced to walk alongside the vehicle rather than in it.

Anchor shrugged. “She has monsters with her, that’s all I can say for certain. She said they’re her pets. But I don’t trust that she’s just stopped to rest.” She shook her head. “She has the entire Wastes, and she just so happens to take a break directly outside our camp?”

Anchor shook her head again, a furrow appearing between her brows. “She wants something. We need to find out what.”

“But… What, so she just… travels the Wastes in a freaking RV with a bunch of monsters?” Rig asked. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” Anchor said, her tone sharp. She looked around the group. “Have any of you seen her before?”

I nearly jumped when she swung around and stared at me. “Ghost?” she asked, her tone almost accusing, like I was withholding information or had somehow known that Mary was going to show up here.

I barely suppressed the urge to hold up my hands in placation. “No. Never. I swear.”

Anchor huffed and reached up to fiddle with the fabric of her mask over the bridge of her nose. “I’m not just letting her and her little band of monsters set up right beside our camp. We need to know what she’s doing. What she wants.”

There was silence before Apollo spoke up, tone hesitant. “Maybe she really *does* just want to rest for a while.”

I doubted it, and I could tell that the majority of the group thought the same. Living in the Wastes made you naturally suspicious of almost everything. And while, logically, I could understand that that was why the other raiders hadn’t warmed to Aury, it didn’t mean I liked it, which I knew was a double standard. But Aury was different. Aury was *visibly* sweet. And kind.

I turned to look out the diner windows, filled with a sudden, overwhelming need to see him. He was sitting outside his room, wings crumpled against his door and long legs pulled up so he could drape his forearms over them. Our eyes met, and a sharp pang of longing cramped my stomach, as well as a dose of guilt. It felt wrong and mean to leave him out. He was in this camp too, even if it was only for the time being. He deserved to know what was going on.

I fidgeted and reluctantly turned my gaze back to Anchor, eager to get this over with so I could go and see Aury. Even the new and weird potential threat just outside the camp wall wasn’t enough to lessen that urge.

“We need to know if anyone else has interacted with her,” Anchor was saying. “If she’s visited any other camps like this. And what she did.”

As the words registered, alarm pinged in my gut. I looked at Anchor and knew she was about to say the very last thing I wanted her to.

“We need Moth.”

I felt my lip curl involuntarily but knew better than to voice my distaste at our leader's decision in front of everyone.

Rig, decidedly less phased—seeing as Moth had never screwed *him* over and left him for dead—shrugged. "Sounds like a good plan to me."

"Traitor," I muttered under my breath. Rig snickered softly.

"Moth will know what to do." Anchor shot me a brief, stern look that said she understood I wouldn't be happy, but it was her final decision. "We'll get a message to him."

I clenched my jaw when she looked at me again with a hesitant expression. Surely, *surely* she wasn't going to—

"Ghost can't go," Rig blurted out. "He's still not a hundred percent. Besides, he's more likely to kick Moth in the balls than bring him back here." He snickered, which made me want to shove him, but at least he'd had my back.

Anchor rolled her eyes, and my face went hot like I was being admonished, even though I hadn't been the one to have said anything.

"Fine. And we need Lilac here, in case Mary or her big monster tries anything." Her dark eyes scanned the room keenly. "Cutter. You know Moth's usual spots? Ghost can show you the map to point them out."

The surly raider bristled. "I'm not going out there."

Moth was a nomad who stuck around this area, occasionally appearing to trade with us or share information or pass messages on from other camps. I assumed he didn't actually *live* anywhere, just travelled around all the time, but there were places he could typically be found. There was a trader outpost further south, close to the former city of Omaha, and a tiny, underground raider market—almost like a mini rundown city—on the outskirts of Des Moines in Iowa.

Both were a fair walk, and none of the others in the camp had made those journeys apart from me.

Anchor stiffened, and I silently counted the seconds she took to try and work out how to handle being openly defied. "We'll give you one of the good weapons—"

"I said I'm not going out there." Cutter folded his arms over his chest and glared at me over the top of his mask. "Send Ghost. He knows the route. And he's used to the Wastes." He sneered at me. "Not like we have to worry about him getting caught by beasties. Apparently, he'll just *befriend* them."

My gloves creaked as my hands clenched into fists. Anger rose in me like a tidal wave, but frustration, as well as being in the presence of almost the entire camp, left me tongue-tied.

Dread pierced me when Anchor sighed and turned toward me with an apologetic look in her eyes. “You *do* know—”

“Anchor, come on.” Rig’s voice held a blend of hard anger and pleading. “Give him a damn break. There’s no reason Cutter can’t go to get Moth. Besides, Ghost is better at scouting than any of us. If you want someone to keep a close eye on that woman and her monster *pets,* it needs to be him.”

I glanced briefly at Rig from the corner of my eye, wanting to reach over and hug the big dork.

Anchor exhaled and rubbed her eyes, looking both mentally and physically exhausted. “Fuck. Okay. Cutter, just do it.” Her voice hardened. “Take one of the guns and get out there. Moth won’t be far. He never is.”

But Cutter was enough of an asshole that he shook his head. “I’m not going out into the Wastes to look for that freak.”

“How about this then,” Anchor barked, arms shaking with anger and tension as she clenched her hands into fists by her sides. Her eyes flashed as she stared at him. “You either go out there to look for Moth, or you go out there to look for a new place to live. Either way, you’re going out there.”

I heard someone—I thought Rusty—gasp, before the diner fell agonisingly silent.

Cutter’s face had gone deathly pale above his mask. When he recovered, he narrowed his eyes at Anchor. “Are you threatening me?”

Anchor shrugged, but there was a fine tremble running through her hands. “If that’s how you want to see it. I see it as an ultimatum. You either do your part for the camp like everyone else, or you get out. It’s simple.”

Cutter’s increasingly murderous gaze swung back to me. “And Ghost? What exactly will *he* be doing for the camp if *I’m* the one out there looking for that white-haired freak?”

That familiar, insidious voice started whispering in the back of my mind, telling me that he was right—if I couldn’t even do my part going out into the Wastes for the camp, I was useless. I could set aside my animosity for Moth. It wasn’t like I’d have to talk to him, aside from telling him Anchor wanted to speak to him.

But god, I just… needed a rest. I needed a little more time not running on adrenaline-soaked fear of being caught by the military, or eaten by a

beastie, or getting injured while out there totally alone in the Wastes with no way to get help or get back to camp—

"Don't even, Cutter!" Daisy's strong voice piped up, cutting through my spiralling thoughts. She was standing behind the counter beside Bo, who was frowning. "Ghost does plenty! You know he does. Pull your weight for once."

This was getting insanely uncomfortable. I didn't like being spoken about, especially while I was in the damn room. "I think—" I started hesitantly, but Rig jabbed a sharp elbow into my side.

"This is bullshit," Cutter exploded, face now a deep red, eyes bright with anger. "*Pull my weight for once*? The fuck is *that* supposed to mean?"

He rounded on Anchor, pointing one thick, accusing finger at her face. "This kind of shit didn't happen when Cat was in charge. Why have we just let you take over running things, huh?" He looked around expectantly. "Shouldn't this kind of thing have gone to a vote? Aren't we supposed to be a *democracy*, like on those old pirate ships? Isn't that what Cat always said?"

Shit. This was getting out of hand.

"Cat and Anchor have always run this camp together," Apollo said in a tense voice, staring Cutter down as he crossed his arms. "You have a problem with it now?"

"I have a problem with *her*," Cutter spat, and Anchor's light brown skin went ruddy with embarrassment across her forehead. "She's incompetent. Cat's been gone less than a year and look at what's happened."

He gestured at me, and then the lone figure of Aury waiting for us outside, his eyes creasing with disgust. "Ghost thinks he can just bring a beastie into the camp to—I don't know, boy, why don't you *tell* us what you've been doing with it in your room for the last week?"

My face flared with heat, and I parted my lips to defend myself, but Cutter barrelled on. "And now some psycho bitch thinks she can post up outside and call the shots? Why aren't we just shooting that big grey fucker with her to show her she can't fuck with us?"

"What the *fuck*, Cutter?" Rig exploded. "*You're* the fucking psycho if you think you can just go around shooting people!"

"It's not a person," Cutter snarled back. "It's a *monster*."

He pointed directly at Aury, whose big black eyes widened a little. He hunched when every pair of eyes in the diner swung toward him. "Just like

that. That's a *monster*. I swear to god, you've all lost your minds." He stared around the diner, his eyes wild. "They're. *Monsters*. They kill people. They *eat people*. And we're just letting one *live here*?"

"Shut up." I finally found my voice, taking a step forward. I was shaking with anger. "Don't talk about him like that. Don't even *look* at him, or I—"

"Okay, okay." Anchor stepped between us, hands fluttering with worry. "We all need to calm down. This isn't helping. We just—" She exhaled and reached up to rub the bridge of her nose wearily. "I'm sorry, Ghost," she began, voice low, "but it would be easier if you just did it."

I was panting, hot all over, sweating with embarrassment and adrenaline at my outburst. Frustration almost made my eyes water as I fisted my gloved hands by my sides and bit down hard on my lower lip. There were seconds of silence, but no one said anything. No one else offered.

"Fine." My voice was barely above a whisper.

From just behind me, I heard Rig exhale unhappily. "No." I jumped when his gloved hand rubbed my arm in a comforting gesture. "You should stay here with—You should stay, Ghost. I'll go—"

"No," I interrupted. If it had been anyone else, I would have agreed and waved them off with a smile. But not Rig. "It's fine, Rig. I'll go. I'll be quick."

"You're still not totally better—"

"I'll go in the morning." I met Anchor's eyes, anger making me brave, daring her to disagree. "I'll make sure to get a good night's sleep."

She had the grace to flush with guilt, and I sensed an apology on the tip of her tongue. But then she seemed to remember the rest of camp standing around us, silently watching.

She straightened, lifting her chin and nodding once. "Good. Thanks, Ghost. Bo and Daisy will make sure you have plenty of supplies."

I turned my gaze to them and saw them both already watching me. Neither of them looked happy. Bo shot me a sad smile from behind his mask while Daisy turned her gaze to Cutter, shooting daggers at him. Then she spun and stomped into the kitchen, clattering angrily in there.

"For now, let's double up on those keeping watch." Anchor's voice trembled the tiniest amount, but she masked it well. "Cutter, you won't mind doing more than one, will you? Go up there now, and take the night watch as well. Rusty, you go and keep watch now too. We'll swap out like our usual routine."

Making Cutter take the dreaded night watch felt like a meaningless victory, and it certainly didn't make me feel better. Maybe Anchor saw it as a punishment. Or maybe it was meant to appease me. I didn't know. I didn't particularly care, and I didn't trust Cutter to have our best interests at heart, anyway.

Raiders started filing out of the diner. Rig rubbed my arm again before he turned to leave. I went to follow him.

"Ghost."

Anchor's voice made my shoulders hunch up, but I didn't turn around. For once, my fear of disappointing her was overridden by how fucking unfair this all felt.

"Not right now, Anchor," I mumbled, brain fried from everything that had happened so far this morning. "I said I'll go, and I will. I'll set out in the morning." I slipped out of the diner before she could demand I stay and talk.

Aury hurried to his feet as I made my way over, his pale face creased with worry. "Ghost," he said in his soft voice, and just the sound soothed me, "are you—"

"I'm okay." I smiled at him behind my mask, fidgety with tension and nerves. I needed to take my mind off everything—off the fact that I'd be heading back out into the Wastes in mere hours.

"Actually, I have something for you," I told him, then gestured for him to follow me into my room. When we stepped into the cool quiet, my shoulders loosened a little. This was my space, and having Aury in it just made it feel more… comforting. Like he fit in here, among my meagre belongings.

Self-conscious, I kept my head bent as I made my way over to the table and set my backpack on it, unzipping it. What if he hated the coat? What if he thought it was weird? What if I showed it to him and he just gave me a blank look and asked why I'd spent my morning sewing goddamn wing holes into a coat for a monster I'd met only a week ago?

I tried to downplay the whole thing. "So, um, I noticed your coat was a little worse for wear, and when I was at the base, I saw this and thought…"

I pulled it out and smoothed out the fabric on top. It was still neatly folded, and my face was hot behind my mask as I turned and thrust it unceremoniously at Aury. "Here."

He blinked and hesitantly stepped forward to take the bundle with careful hands.

"It's a new coat," I blurted when he didn't say anything. "I—I modified the back so it would be easy to get on around your wings but wouldn't just hang open like yours does now." I gestured toward him, trying to convey that I was talking about the three strips the back of his current coat had been sliced into at some point.

Aury slowly unfolded the bundle and held the coat up by its shoulders as the rest of it fell toward the floor. I'd cut the back into three strips, much like his current coat, but then sewed little buttons on the inside, lining up the two new seams so he could easily put it on, then button it up under his wings.

Aury's black eyes burned as he stared at the coat. "Will… will you help me put it on?" he asked.

I nodded straight away, taking it from him so he could take off the old, ragged one he was wearing. He did so hurriedly, like he was eager to get rid of it, but rather than leave it in a crumpled heap on the floor, he picked it up and carefully draped it over the back of one of the chairs. My heart melted, just a little.

"Here." I held it up so Aury could put it on, and he turned so his back was to me, ready to slip his arms in the sleeves.

My breath caught, and I stared. Aury's worn linen shirt had been cut at the back to accommodate his wings—a big hole from the collar to just below where his wings protruded from his back, next to his shoulder blades.

His back was… beautiful. Aury was tall and lithe, but his shoulders were wide. I could see now that his back was strong and perfectly defined, probably from carrying the weight of his wings. And the lump running down the centre of his spine, the one that I had previously noticed, was a line of protrusions similar to those on his neck. They were dark greenish-grey, with fringed edges that were potentially sharp. They looked like they would flex, currently lying flat along his spine, but shifting and rising a little with Aury's movements.

His pale, green-tinged skin looked so smooth and unblemished in the patches that hadn't been scarred. And he had plenty of scars, including the one Apollo had told us about when Aury had first come to the camp—a small *001* branded beside his left shoulder blade.

My chest clenched uncomfortably tight at the sight. For a moment, I wanted to wrap my arms around Aury and drag him into my bed, to hide under the covers. I wanted to protect him from ever being hurt again. My eyes drifted to his shredded wing. A glaring, unmissable reminder of what he'd been put through.

Aury's arms slipped into the sleeves, and I blinked, snapping back to the present. I carefully arranged the strips of fabric around his wings, then leaned back so I could tilt my head and peer below the curve of where his wing emerged from his back. I started to do up the buttons, my fingers awkward and fumbling in my gloves.

When the last button was done, I stepped back and watched as Aury turned to face me. My throat got tight for a second. He was grinning at me, looking unspeakably happy, his big black eyes glowing. He looked so beautiful and joyful—so grateful to *me*—even though all I'd done was give him a coat.

It made me want to give him anything he wanted. Everything.

"If you don't like it, you don't—" I stopped myself, flustered, because it was a stupid thing to say. He clearly liked it.

"I do." Aury's voice was soft, and my heart thudded hard in my chest when he took a step closer to me. "I… Thank you so much, Ghost."

I could feel myself gazing at him adoringly, and I forced myself to look away, clearing my throat. "It's fine," I mumbled, pathetically pleased. Feeling brave, I looked back at him, up into his endless, liquid eyes with those pinpricks of colour. "I'll find you a new shirt too, and maybe pants. I have to go back out tomorrow anyway, so—"

Aury's sweet smile dropped. He took another step closer. "I heard you all talking." He flushed, an adorable ruddy hue over his cheekbones. "I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, I just… My hearing is—"

"It's okay," I said, distracted by his proximity now. I wished I'd taken my mask off so I could breathe in his scent. After so many days of him staying in my room, I was addicted to it. An intoxicating blend of cold fresh air and something softer. Sweeter. I could smell him in my sheets, and it meant I woke up every morning achingly hard, already battling a frustrating mixture of lust and longing before I'd even rubbed the sleep out of my eyes.

"I don't want you to go."

Aury's soft voice interrupted my thoughts, and my throat ached. "I, um __"

He stepped even closer, until I had to tilt my head back to keep looking at him. I swallowed, feeling the bob of my Adam's apple in my stretched throat. I licked my lips beneath my gas mask.

“It’s not safe,” Aury said, and I held my breath when I saw his hands lift from his sides and hover for a moment. Then he rested them on my shoulders, and even though it was an entirely innocent touch, my heart started to pound. “Is this—Am I okay—”

“Yes,” I blurted, panicking he’d move back and stop touching me.

Aury smiled at me, a little uncertain, which just made me want to melt. My stomach twisted with fearful, wonderful anticipation when his long fingers shifted, rounding to cup my shoulders, the touch somehow becoming exhilaratingly more intimate.

“Please don’t go,” he said. “I’ll… I will worry for you.”

God. Was I such a sucker that a simple, half-decent sentiment directed my way succeeded in turning me into a puddle of smitten goo?

Aury hesitated, before lifting a hand and brushing back an unruly lock of my hair. I shivered when his fingers skimmed my temple, my gloves creaking as my hands clenched into fists by my sides. Anticipation shot through me, sharp and terrifying.

Yes. Yes, I was.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Ghost.” Aury licked his lips, drawing my gaze there immediately, my stomach clenching with lust at the sight of his black, forked tongue. “Can I… Can I take your mask off?”

I suppressed a shiver as I nodded. His request felt oddly intimate, but I wasn’t about to deny this monster anything. Not when he was looking at me like that. His elegant fingers were still in my hair, and the faint warmth of his long, lean body was seeping into the front of my clothes.

He shot me a small, nervous smile as his fingers moved, gently grasping my mask to pull it down. I finally did something instead of just standing there like a dolt, reaching out with trembling hands to rest them on his waist. I had a brief fantasy that Aury was going to pull my mask down and swoop in to kiss me, but then I flushed as I realised I probably didn’t look that great as soon as my mask had been taken off. There’d be a red line where the edge had dug into my skin, and my upper lip would be damp with sweat.

Self-conscious, I lowered my gaze as Aury gently pulled the mask down, so it was looped around my neck, hanging there with the hard plastic bumping my collarbone. I couldn’t quite catch my breath when his fingers returned to my hair, this time threading through the strands just behind my ears, so his hands were cupping the back of my head.

“Ghost,” he said again, forcing my gaze back up. His big black eyes drifted to my mouth and stayed there.

My face got hot, and I resisted the urge to reach up and rub at the red line across the bridge of my nose. Instead, I croaked, “Yeah,” like an idiot, my voice thick. My fingers tightened just a little on his sides, feeling the supple skin through his shirt and new coat.

“Can I…” Aury swayed closer. “I want to—”

“Ghost.” We both flinched as Anchor pounded on the door. “I’m sorry, but I need to talk to you.”

I gritted my teeth, frustration pounding in my blood, making my head throb. I was already going back out into the Wastes for her. Couldn’t she leave me alone in the meantime? Couldn’t *everyone* except Aury leave me alone in the meantime?

“Fine,” I heard myself gritting out, and wanted to kick myself.

Aury shot me a rueful little smile and stepped back, putting distance between us. I silently lamented the feel of his long fingers leaving my hair. “I’ll leave you alone to speak.”

Fuck. “Okay, but I—” I stopped, flustered, no idea what I’d been about to say. “Um. I’ll… see you later?”

Aury nodded.

“Ghost, come on,” Anchor called through the door, sounding exhausted already.

With one last look, Aury turned and walked to the door, limping only the smallest amount. I hurriedly pulled my mask back up just before he pulled it open, needing my armour in place to deal with Anchor when I was still feeling so angry about what had happened.

“Oh, One—Aury.” Anchor sounded a little taken aback. “Sorry, I didn’t —” Her eyes tracked deeper into the room and found me. “I can come back —”

“Come in,” I said shortly, because I was on the verge of snapping at her. She’d already interrupted, so we may as well get it over with.

As she stepped into the room, Aury gazed at me for a moment longer over the top of her head before he left, closing the door softly behind him.

Silence descended. It made me fidgety, so I went and perched on the edge of my bed. After a moment, Anchor walked over to the table and pulled out the chair with Aury’s old coat still draped over the back.

She sat. Leaned forward, resting her forearms on her knees. Wiped a hand over her forehead. “Look, I just wanted to… I’m sorry about what just happened.” She looked up at me. “About making you go when I know you don’t want to. When you still don’t feel great.”

I didn’t know what to say. Either way, I still had to do it. Did apologising really help?

In the end I said nothing, and after a moment Anchor groaned and scrubbed her face again. “This was why Cat dealt with this stuff. I’m not good at diplomacy. Definitely didn’t inherit any of my dad’s strengths in that area.”

Anchor’s father had been an Egyptian diplomat. He and Anchor’s mother had been abroad when the monsters came, so Anchor had attempted to get to a safe zone with their cook and housekeeper. I wasn’t sure exactly what had happened, but I knew it hadn’t gone well, because Anchor had

been alone when she'd found Cat—another teenager like her, dirty and afraid—wandering the Wastes a while later.

Anchor paused, then let out a self-deprecating little snort. "I *thought* I was good at keeping everyone in line, but apparently I'm failing at that now, too."

That made me feel bad for her, so after an uncomfortable silence, I gruffly said, "Cutter's a prick."

Anchor huffed. "Yeah. He is. But I let him get away with it." She tugged at her dark curls. "I'm worried about what he'll do."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Dark eyes met mine. "You heard him just now. That was practically a declaration of mutiny."

My mouth twisted behind my mask. "Yeah."

Anchor exhaled, shaking her head. "It's not even like I particularly *want* to be in charge. Shit, maybe I should let the camp vote on who they want running things. But…" She looked at me again, and I could see the worried gleam in her eyes. "I don't want it to be Cutter."

My gut soured at the thought. "God, that would be bad." Because she looked so down and stressed, I added, "You're a good leader, Anchor. You just… maybe shouldn't let Cutter get away with his shit."

"No, I know." She reached up and tightened her ponytail, eyes more determined. "Thanks. We just need to find Cat, and things will get better. I never realised Cutter was such a sexist pig. I mean, I knew he was bad, but still."

Unease roiled, but I stayed silent. *Cat isn't coming back*, I wanted to tell her, but I physically couldn't get the words out. I couldn't handle seeing her face crumple. Or maybe it wouldn't. Maybe she'd flat-out ignore it or deny it, like she had been for the last six months. Maybe she'd just send me back out there to keep looking.

"Anyway," Anchor said when I remained silent, "I'll leave you alone. You, um… you don't have to take any watch shifts today, as you're heading out tomorrow."

Her tone was a little ingratiating, and I ignored it as the reminder that I had to go back out there caused the beginning strains of a headache to echo through my skull. "Okay."

She hesitated for a second, like she wanted to say more, before standing up and heading to the door. "See you later, Ghost. Be safe tomorrow."

After she'd shut the door behind her, I sat in the silence of my room for a long moment. I knew I should go back out and make myself useful. Go and collect water from the river, or hunt while Lilac was busy keeping an eye on Mary and her weird monster pets.

Instead, I yanked off my boots and mask and crawled into bed. My headache got worse, throbbing behind my eyes, as I pictured the very near future, when I'd be waking up in the murky grey dawn light and getting dressed, then heading out of the camp walls and vanishing into the Wastes while most of the others were still asleep, safe in their beds.

I heard the horrifying sounds of that monster from the military base echoing in my head. Saw, in my head, the image of it ripping the skin clean off that other monster's hand. I shuddered.

I wanted Aury to be here, reading to me in his low, soft voice, but it felt pathetic to go and ask him to do it when I wasn't sick anymore. I was already developing an unhealthy infatuation with the monster, and the likelihood was that he was going to leave soon, very soon, now that his leg was healed. What reason did he have to stay?

I couldn't start depending on him to make me feel better. That was just a recipe for disaster.

I should get out of bed. I should go help with the plants or take a shift keeping watch.

But I did none of those things. I just burrowed deeper in my bed and tried to block everything out for a little while.

I must have fallen asleep, because I was suddenly blinking heavy eyes open, and I was too hot under the covers. The room was warm, with shafts of deep gold light sneaking through gaps in the curtains and spilling across the floor. I watched the dust motes drift in the light for a few moments before sitting up, clawing my messy hair back from my forehead.

The faint warble of the girls pecking around outside filled me with a sudden urge to go and see them. It had been a few days, and I missed them, so I got up and gulped down some warm water from my canteen before wiping my hand over my mouth.

As I stepped outside, I couldn't help but look over at Aury's door. It was shut. I wondered what he was doing and furtively glanced around as I made

my way around the building to my little yard out back, but I didn't spot his huge black wings anywhere.

I was distracted a moment later as I stepped into my yard and Trixie looked up at me and clucked. "Hi, ladies." I grinned and sank down to my haunches, even though it was rare any of them were particularly interested in a fuss. Ginger let me brush my fingertips over her soft feathers before I stood back up and checked everything over. Lilac had given them fresh water, and I could see feed already down. I ducked my head in the coop and saw he'd also already collected the eggs this morning and taken them to Daisy and Bo.

I'd have to go and thank him again and ask him if there were any jobs he needed doing, or anything I could scavenge for him out in the Wastes. If I was looking for Moth, I'd be heading to the trading outpost and the underground market further south, where items up for trade were far more varied than what I could find in old houses or gutted stores. And because the outposts were a raider secret well kept from the military, there were plenty of black-market goods available. Maybe I could get Lilac a new weapon. Or… plant pots? I struggled to think of what else he would even like. A new whittling knife, maybe. Or I was pretty sure he had a weakness for pecans. I'd noticed Daisy slipping him a little tin of them once or twice, whenever we'd traded for some with passing nomads.

Waving goodbye to the girls and locking up the yard, I made my way back around to the front of the building. I hovered outside my door, eyeing up the diner. I was hungry, and dinner would be soon, but I just couldn't bring myself to make idle talk with Anchor if she was in there—and she normally was. I considered knocking on Aury's door for a second, but I didn't want to be needy, so instead I just skulked back into my room and settled on the bed with one of the books I'd taken from Cat's room. It was about local wildlife, and I'd already read it several times, but I didn't want to go ask Anchor for the key to get new ones, so I sat back and opened it.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed when there was a knock at the door.

"It's me," Rig called.

I set aside my book and shuffled off the bed to go open the door. Rig was holding two bowls, and he smiled at me from behind his mask as I took them from him. “Daisy said you hadn’t been by to get dinner,” he said as he followed me into the room, shutting the door behind him.

“No, I didn’t want to talk to Anchor,” I admitted, carrying the bowls to the table. “What have we got?”

“She made kimchi stew again,” Rig told me. “Especially for you, she said, because she knows it’s your favourite. And she said the kimchi will help you get over the last of your cold.”

I smiled, sitting down at the table in the seat with Aury’s old coat still draped over the back. Rig sat opposite me. “Have you seen Aury?” I asked as we started eating. “Is he okay?”

“He was helping in the garden again,” Rig said through a mouthful of stew, his mask abandoned on the table. He paused, and his eyes flitted to me, a little sad. “No one would go near him, though. Not until Lilac came off guard duty and stayed with him for a while.”

My fingers tightened around my spoon at the thought. Poor Aury. He was so kind and gentle and sweet. But because he—what, had wings? Looked different?—people treated him badly. I remembered Cutter’s angry muttering that first day Aury was here, and Rusty telling me some of the raiders weren’t happy about him staying in the camp. I wondered if Cutter was sowing discord. It wouldn’t have surprised me.

I wasn’t going to let him do anything to Aury, or treat him poorly. I was a little surprised at the strength of the steely determination that coursed through me. But the thought of Aury’s sweet, beautiful face flinching when Cutter started pointing at him through the diner window earlier just solidified it. I was going to do everything in my power to keep Aury from being hurt again.

While he was still here, at least. I just didn’t know how long that would be.

Something like panic made my stomach turn, and suddenly I wasn’t hungry anymore. The thought of Aury leaving made me tense up with misery. When he left, I’d likely never see him again. What were the odds I’d come across him randomly in the Wastes for a second time?

I pushed the thoughts away and concentrated on my stew, forcing myself to finish it despite my appetite fleeing. I’d have to remember to thank Daisy for making it before I left in the morning. Maybe I’d pick something up for

her at the market, too. If I had anything good to trade, that is. I glanced around my room. I didn't have much. I could've traded that whisky for a hell of a lot if I hadn't given it to Rig. The cigars, too. Maybe the lighter and cigar cutter would get me something.

"Sorry you have to go back out there again so soon," Rig said, pulling me from my thoughts. He scraped the last of the stew up from his bowl. "I know you'd rather stay here with Aury," he added with a grin, waggling his eyebrows at me.

I rolled my eyes. "Dork."

He chuckled. "So, what are you going to do for the rest of the evening?" he asked me. "I finished my shift keeping watch just before dinner, so we can hang out. Or you can borrow that book," he added in an eager tone. "You know, the one you accidentally picked up for Aury."

I let out a rusty laugh. "It's good, huh?"

"Oh yeah," he said, then added with a sly look, "Maybe you could read it to Aury."

My cheeks flushed at that, and I cleared my throat. "Shut up, dork." To get him off the topic, I asked him, "So you saw the RV out there. What do you think?"

"Super weird." Rig shook his head. "And she's chained those monsters up—what the hell?"

"Yeah. It's messed up." I thought of Aury in those chains at the base, and my heart clenched up.

Rig fiddled with his spoon, looking into his bowl. "The one with the war hammer. Did he say anything when they got here? Why's he… What's with the cage on his head?"

"No idea." I got up to light the candles dotted around my room, which was rapidly darkening now the sun had set. "But no, he didn't say anything. Just clicked at the two beasties pulling the RV to get them to stop."

Rig cleared his throat. "Oh, right." I heard him stacking the bowls and spoons as I lit the last candle. "So, want to hang out for a bit?" he asked.

"I think I'm just going to shower and go to bed," I said, feeling a little guilty, because I was secretly hoping Aury would knock and ask if we could read together for a while. Or something.

A spark grew warm in the pit of my stomach.

"Yeah. You're leaving early tomorrow, aren't you?" Rig got up and collected the bowls and his mask. He balanced them in one hand and

squeezed my shoulder as he passed me. “Be careful, okay? And don’t punch Moth when you find him.”

My lips quirked with a humourless smile as I opened the door for him. “I’ll try not to.”

Rig leaned forward and kissed my cheek before he left the room. I didn’t bother closing the door behind him, instead slipping on my mask, grabbing my towel and leaving to take a shower before it got fully dark. Luckily the showers were empty, except for someone taking a leak in the furthest outhouse. I showered quickly and redressed, shivering a little as the air cooled my damp hair on the walk back to my room.

I could see a few raiders still in the diner, and someone walking along the top of the camp wall, keeping watch. No noises rose from beyond the perimeter. I wondered what Mary and her monster pets were doing. What she’d eat. What did she keep in that motorhome? Was the tall grey guy ever allowed in there, or did he stay chained up outside?

I went around to the yard and quickly shooed the hens into the coop for the night, saying goodnight to them as I locked everything up. After walking back around the side of the building, I cast a longing glance at Aury’s door as I unlocked mine. He had to be in there now, because I hadn’t seen him anywhere else in the camp. Unless he was hanging out with Lilac. If Aury liked plants, maybe Lilac was showing him the ones he lovingly tended to in his room. Gnawing jealousy hit me, and I flushed at how pathetic it was. I’d known Aury a week. It was ridiculous. And besides, it was a *good* thing if other raiders were being friendly to him. It was.

I hung my towel up to dry when I got into my room and picked up a candle, carrying it with me while I blew out most of the others so they didn’t waste, filling the small room with looming shadows. I set the lit one on the nightstand so I could read for a while. I remembered I still had those military tactics books I’d picked up at the base in my backpack, but that was a little too heavy right now. Instead I grabbed another from the pile waiting to be returned to Cat’s room. A hard-boiled detective novel. It would do for a while before bed.

Before I got into bed, I stripped down and put on my sleeping pants, a pair of sweats so thin and well-worn they were practically indecent. I neatly folded my clothes and set them on the dresser, my mask and gloves on top.

I’d been reading for about an hour when a soft knock made me jump. My stomach dipped with a mixture of terror and anticipation as I licked my

lips, setting down my book on the nightstand beside the candle. I slid off the bed and made my way over to the door on slightly shaky legs.

Aury's big, winged form loomed against the darkness behind him when I opened the door, stealing my breath. His pale skin almost glowed in the faint, flickering lights that danced over his features from the candle behind me, catching on the texture of his burn scars on the right side of his face.

"Hi," I breathed, face already hot, because I was a total loser.

Aury smiled at me, soft and sweet, but his eyes were… Something burned in them as they dropped to gaze at my mouth, like they had earlier. "Ghost."

He wasn't wearing his new coat, and his long, elegant fingers rubbed up and down the billowing sleeves of his shirt in a nervous gesture.

I was tongue-tied, frozen on the spot with one hand still on the door handle. Aury's wings twitched, and he dropped his arms as he looked at me. "Can I come in?" he asked, and that little ember of warmth that had sparked in my gut earlier suddenly flared.

It was late. The camp was quiet and dark behind Aury, only the solar fairy lights Rig had strung along the front of the diner giving off the very last of their faint glow. I saw the outline of a raider keeping watch at the top of the camp wall move against the blackness of the night sky, but otherwise, everything was still.

My stomach lurched with breathless anticipation as I nodded wordlessly and moved to let Aury in.

I didn't think we were going to be interrupted this time.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Aury didn’t waste time.

The moment I shut the door behind him, he turned and stepped close. I swallowed, my cheeks flushing when his dark eyes dipped and flared, taking in my half-naked state and the fact that my dick was clearly visible through the thin fabric of my pants.

“Ghost.” He dragged his gaze back up to look me in the eyes, and my throat ached when I saw the intense longing I was feeling reflected back at me. “I want to… Can I kiss you?” he asked, voice shaking just a little, and my breath caught in my throat.

I nodded, nerves keeping me silent. My fingers flexed by my sides, aching to reach out and touch him, but I was frozen. My heart started pounding, so hard I wondered if he could hear it with his supernatural hearing.

If he could, he didn’t say anything. Just stepped closer and placed a gentle hand on my side. I shivered at the bare contact, all too aware that I was wearing next to nothing, and Aury’s elegant fingers were touching me, skin on skin.

When Aury kissed me, his lips soft and achingly sweet, I got hard so fast that I went lightheaded. Sucking in a shaky breath, my body finally woke up even as my brain blanked. I surged forward and kissed him back, already too eager, my hands reaching out to grasp his sides and tug him closer.

Aury made a low noise against my mouth and deepened the kiss as his long fingers trailed over my side and across to my stomach, making me shiver. I shuddered hard at the feel of his bare skin against mine and grazed his lower lip with my teeth.

Now we’d finally started, we couldn’t stop. Aury moaned another low sound and parted my lips with his in a rush, sinking his tongue into my mouth. *Oh shit*. I made an eager noise and gripped his sides tighter, my dick twitching in my pants as my tongue slid over his. He tasted so good. Sweet and deep. Addictive.

Not to mention that his forked tongue was especially talented, making me want to whimper as it played with mine. I imagined it on my dick and

shuddered again, tugging Aury even closer until our hips met. I moaned at the pressure of his thigh against my trapped cock.

The long fingers resting against my stomach trailed lower, sending cascades of shivers down my spine. Aury raised both his hands to cup my face, breaths quick against my mouth as our lips parted briefly. He kissed me again, deeper, desperation bleeding through as our mouths moved feverishly together, getting more frantic. Hotter.

“Ghost,” Aury panted against my mouth long moments later, but the sound of it jarred me.

I licked my lips, nudging his nose with the tip of mine. “Will you… Can you use my real name?” I whispered, cheeks heating even in the dark, feeling strangely exposed by asking the question.

Aury stilled. His hands were still clasping the sides of my face, and I felt his thumb smooth over my cheekbone. “What is it?”

I licked my lips again, a wave of nerves washing over me. Which was ridiculous, but so few people knew my real name. Only Rig, Cat and Anchor, actually. And no one had called me by it for longer than I could remember.

“Gage.” I whispered it like I was afraid the military was secretly listening in or something, one ear pressed eagerly to my door.

I felt Aury’s lips curve up into a grin against my mouth, and he nuzzled my cheek. “Gage,” he repeated in a low whisper. An intense shudder went through me, pleasure rippling. I wanted him to say it again. To keep saying it.

Then he did. “Will you touch me, Gage?” Aury asked, pressing a soft kiss to the corner of my mouth, then another to my chin.

My jaw clenched as I tried to control the wave of lust that rushed through me, making my limbs twitch with their urgent need to move, to do what he asked. I wanted to fall on him like a slavering beast. I forced myself to have a sliver of control, but my fingers were still clumsy and trembling with haste as I began fumbling with the tie on the front of Aury’s pants. The hard, covered length of him jerked against my hands, making me groan out a rough sound before he kissed me again, crushing his lips to mine and thrusting his tongue back inside.

We both moaned when my right hand finally slipped inside and fisted his throbbing length. It was achingly hard, and my own dick throbbed in sympathy when I felt the pre-cum pulsing from the tip in a constant stream

—so much of it that his cock was already slick. My breath caught. It was insanely sexy, and my fingers were wet as I traced the length of his shaft, trailing the tips over veins that felt hot and prominent.

I slid my fist all the way down to cup his balls, wanting to feel all of him. They were big and smooth, and Aury let out a little moan that made my own sac tighten as I cupped him gently and breathed shakily against his mouth.

Aury kissed me again, harder his time, his tongue thrusting more aggressively into my mouth as I shoved my other eager hand into his pants so I could play with his balls and cock at the same time. I hadn't been able to do this with anyone for a very long time, so I was already riding the edge of desperation, but this felt… different than it ever had before. More vital. More important. Like doing this with Aury was going to change everything.

Heart thudding hard in my chest, tongue duelling with Aury's, I started stroking his cock with intent, thumb catching on his flared head, rubbing through the wetness spilling from his tip in a heavy, tantalising flow, squeezing the shaft so I could feel those thick, raised veins throbbing under my palm.

Aury let out a helpless sound, his knees almost buckling, and I moaned against his mouth in response, already craving another reaction like that. I stroked my fingers over his tight, heavy sac again, caressing the smooth skin, and Aury gave it to me. His breath stuttered against my mouth, hard cock pulsing in my fist.

"Gage," he mumbled against my mouth, voice restless. Hearing him say my name again made my dick jerk hard in my pants, trapped uncomfortably. My hips arched, trying to find some relief as I pushed my dick against Aury's hip.

The action seemed to trigger something in Aury. Suddenly he was releasing my face and gently pulling my hands out of his pants, tangling our fingers together. With a small smile, he led me away from the door.

Toward the bed.

My chest started rising and falling faster as my breathing sped up. Aury pressed a brief, hot kiss to my mouth before pushing me back onto the bed and climbing on after me, crawling up my body until he was leaning over me on all fours. I was momentarily shocked by his assertiveness, so at odds with his usual gentle nature, but… shit, it was hot.

"Is this okay?" he asked, and I nodded immediately.

“Yes. Yes, definitely. Fuck,” I croaked, still reeling from the fact that this was happening. Aury was touching me. Kissing me. It felt like I’d wanted this for so long, even though it hadn’t been long at all. But I’d freaking *pined* for him, almost since the moment I’d met him. I didn’t know what had caused my instant reaction to this beastie, but I wasn’t going to question it right this second.

I just wished my brain would stop struggling to catch up with what was currently happening. Right now, it felt almost like I was watching this all happen to someone else.

I palmed his sides, wanting to kiss him again. Before I could, Aury sat up and quickly pulled off his shirt, then somehow stripped me naked faster than I could realise what was happening. I was panting, cock jerking hungrily against my stomach, balls already pulled up tight.

I shivered in the cool air of my room. “Aury,” I couldn’t help but rasp, wanting him back over me, covering me.

His huge wings loomed above him in the near-dark when he leaned over me again. The candlelight flickered and caused the green sheen on the thin, leathery membrane to undulate over the surface, like an oil slick that had been disturbed. His head dipped to kiss me, slow and hot, his forked tongue sinking into my mouth and winding around mine. I shuddered with pleasure, my right hand dipping back into the front of his pants, the flat of my palm sliding down the slick steel bar of his cock before I moved my hand lower to cup his sac again.

Aury moaned into my mouth, then broke the kiss to trail his lips feverishly over my jaw and down my neck. When he reached a nipple and sucked, making me hiss with pleasure, I had to give up touching him, no longer able to reach as his body moved lower.

Aury scraped his teeth over my other nipple before continuing down. My stomach lurched with excitement. I tried to control my breathing, but I was panting fast already, my heart hammering. God, I couldn’t even remember the last time anyone had sucked me off, and just the anticipation of it was threatening to—

“*God*,” I barked when Aury’s hot tongue slicked up the length of my dick. It pulsed wildly in reaction, pre-cum flowing onto my stomach, though nowhere near as much as Aury was producing. I bit down hard on my lower lip to try and stay quiet, all too aware of how easily sounds travelled from the rooms if you were walking outside at night.

My focus narrowed, reality sharpening as my brain blessedly caught up with what was happening. My chest heaved as I stared up at my ceiling. Aury's tongue was on my dick. Aury was licking his way back down its length, and now he was—

"Oh shit," I moaned out, shuddering hard when Aury's forked tongue slicked over the seam of my balls. They tightened in response, and Aury made a low sound as he sucked one gently, his mouth soft and warm and wet and *fuck*, it was going to make me come too soon.

"Aury." My voice trembled out of me as I lifted my head to look down and watch in the dim candlelight, fingers tentatively threading through his dark hair. It was soft and felt cool against my skin, a sharp contrast to the wet heat of his mouth.

My knees fell open wider, hips and ass flexing up off the bed to get closer. Aury's tongue slid back up my length. When I felt the twin points tickle either side of my cockhead, the sensitive V cupped in the split of his tongue, I actually whimpered. My thighs trembled.

Aury's hot mouth encased the head of my dick in a wet kiss, the slurping, sucking sound loud in the room, making my teeth clench. I realised my fingers had tightened in Aury's hair and forced my hands to relax, but I was panting, my hips flexing up into Aury's mouth constantly, unable to keep still. Hot pleasure thrummed through me, up and down my shaft, tingling in my balls, making everything feel tight and tense.

When Aury's tongue rippled against my cockhead and he sucked gently, my hips bucked. "Oh god."

I raked my teeth over my lower lip and looked down the length of my body again. My brows pinched together when I saw Aury's head bobbing over my hips, my achingly stiff cock disappearing into the suctioning heat of his mouth, over and over.

When Aury's pitch black eyes turned up to meet mine, my lips fell open on a little puff of breath. He sucked slowly up my length; a tight pull that made everything clench up. My thighs trembled harder, arms tense and shaking. Aury held my gaze, and then I saw the black of his forked tongue framing my cockhead as he licked lightly.

"Oh god." I shuddered, curling up off the bed as my cock started pulsing. When I saw the first spurt of cum shoot into Aury's mouth, it only made everything worse. "*Aury*."

I clenched his hair tighter, shivering with bliss, my cock flexing, pumping round after round of cum directly onto Aury's tongue. I couldn't take my eyes off the sight.

When I finally stopped spurting, Aury swallowed and sucked my cockhead with a low moan. I shuddered with sensitivity, but it felt amazing. I groaned when Aury sucked me deeper before sliding his mouth free to kiss down my length. He nuzzled my balls.

My chest clenched. I ran my fingers through his cool hair in a gentle caress. "Aury."

He finally moved, nuzzling my stomach, making his way back up my body until he kissed me, deep and hot. I slid my hands down his body and tugged at his pants.

"Take these off," I pleaded against his mouth. "I want you. I want to—"

"You don't have to do anything, Gage." Aury kissed me, agonisingly soft, his tongue brushing the ticklish, sensitive part of my top lip. "I don't expect you to—"

"God, I want to." Feeling brave, I pushed Aury back and scrambled up, turning us so that his back was against the headboard, wings crumpled behind him. I figured it was more comfortable than lying flat on his back, with the hard, bony fingers trapped under him.

Our fingers clashed as we both hurried to pull Aury's pants down. He was breathing hard, chest heaving as I stripped them off his legs, taking care not to rip the fabric on the deadly talons of his feet.

Once they were gone, I kneeled between his spread thighs and looked down at his naked body laid out before me for the first time. My breath left me in a hard rush. Now that the edge had been taken off, my brain was a little less lust-fogged, so I was able to take in every tiny, beautiful detail of his body. To catalogue all the differences that made him unique—made him Aury.

His body was as uniquely gorgeous as his face. Raised black veins wound over almost every part of him, thicker and more prominent than a human's, under skin so white it almost glowed in the low light. I dipped my gaze to his groin, and my breath caught. Those veins snaked up the length of his dick, winding and dark and so prominent that my gut clenched with lust at the sight. I could see the thick, clear wetness covering his cockhead, dripping down the shaft, and my mouth watered. His balls were big and

smooth. His thighs were long and perfectly shaped—not thick with muscle, but strong and toned, just like the rest of him.

Scars were littered everywhere, speaking of his traumatic time at the military base. I tried not to focus on them, not wanting to make Aury uncomfortable, but I decided that I was going to find and kiss every single one another time. To try and take away some of the pain that no doubt lingered from their presence.

I didn't know if Aury mistook my staring for trepidation, but he reached out and brushed my cheek with gentle fingers. His hard cock bobbed with his movement, making my gut clench in anticipation of having it in my mouth.

"I meant it, Gage," Aury said softly. "I didn't do that expecting anything in return. You don't—"

"Aury," I interrupted. My breath left me in a shuddery rush, fingers tightening on his thighs as my cock twitched and started tingling with blood again already. "I really want to suck your dick."

It was a hard, clawing need inside me, no less intense even though I'd already come. There was an edge of desperation driving me, and I knew I was going to enjoy this possibly even more than I'd loved having his mouth on me.

Aury let out a little sound, half amused and half desperate, as he sat back against the headboard, shifting a little to get comfortable against his crumpled wings. I raised my gaze from his cock to see him smile at me, and I felt my mouth split into a wide smile in return. I leaned forward and kissed him, sliding my hands higher up his tense thighs. Aury moaned into my mouth, hands coming up to rest on my sides, stroking up and down and making me shiver.

I broke our kiss to move down, too eager to feel nervous anymore. Aury didn't have nipples or a navel, which was a little jarring at first, but soon I was distracted by the taste of his warm skin under my tongue. The feel of those winding black veins throbbing against my lips. I moaned and made my way down his torso quickly, desperate to lick that thick wetness off his cock.

Aury let out a low, hungry sound when I did just that a moment later, winding my tongue around his slick cockhead, moaning deliriously at the taste. There was so much of it. It was still pulsing out of the slit in a steady stream. If this was how much pre-cum he produced… how much cum

would there be? The thought made me groan as I gave his cockhead a wet, sucking kiss, wanting more.

"Gage," Aury breathed. Hearing him say my name—my real name—in that low, pleasure-soaked voice made me moan with desperate hunger as I glanced up at him through my eyelashes, taking more of his hard cock into my mouth.

Aury sucked in a sharp breath, staring back down at me, a glow rising in those big black eyes that had nothing to do with the candlelight flickering over the burn-scarred side of his face. He lifted his hands and slid long fingers through my hair, the caressing touch making my eyelids get heavy as I sucked. Those fingers wandered, brushing the shell of my ear, sliding down my neck and over my nape. I felt his thumb brush over my chin, then lift to trace the press of my lower lip against his veiny shaft.

Shivering with pleasure, I sucked up and off his cock to kiss my way down its length to his full, heavy sac. It was pulled up tight now, hugging the base of his shaft, and I sucked on one globe as my fingers teased the other.

Aury's harsh, panting breaths sounded from above me. His hands cupped my head and his thighs fell open wider, hips flexing as my tongue slid over the tight skin of his sac. I already missed the taste of him, so I licked my way back up and over the head with a moan. My cock was hard again between my legs, hanging like a steel bar, but I ignored it, enjoying myself too much.

I'd always loved sex, and I never, ever got to have it. I loved being able to forget everything else. To become uninhibited and wild, focusing only on my body's pressing demands and being able to blank out all the worries from my brain. I especially loved giving head, pouring all my concentration and energy into making another person feel good.

And this was better than it had ever been before, with anyone else. This made me no longer care about how little I got to actually have sex. Because this was Aury, and everything about him was already a million times more erotic than any human could have ever been—to me, at least. The taste of him in my mouth. The sounds of his low, breathy moans and panting breaths. The sight of his inhuman body, ghostly pale with winding black veins like tiny snakes under his skin. Wide shoulders and long, supple limbs sprawled on the bed as his hips writhed, trying to get closer to my mouth.

He was close. I could feel it in the impossible stiffness of his cock in my mouth. Even more pre-cum spilled from the tip, and I swallowed it just as fast while I sucked, bobbing my head faster, lost in a haze of lust and pleasure. One hand cupped his balls while the other fisted the slick base of his cock, stroking in time with the sucking draws of my mouth. I was barely aware of the fact that I was moaning continuously around his dick. It was entirely possible that I was enjoying this even more than Aury was. God, it felt so good to have him in my mouth, to have my entire world narrowed down to giving Aury pleasure. I wanted to give him so much that he was drunk on it. I wanted to replace every bad memory he had of humans with good ones. With memories of me.

I let go of his sac to trail my fingertips over his inner thigh, wanting to feel the tensing of his muscles under my hand. Aury shuddered and moaned, hands sliding from my hair to cup my shoulders as his upper body curled forward. “Gage,” he panted, cock already pulsing in my mouth. “I’m —I—”

I moaned louder as I felt him swell, felt those thick veins throb under my tongue. Then, as Aury let out a hoarse cry, his cock erupted. The first flood of cum almost made me choke as it hit the back of my throat with force. I swallowed hurriedly and kept sucking, desperate for all of it, my scalp tingling with delirious pleasure.

God, there was *so much* of it. His orgasm went on and on, each spurt as heavy as the last, until I was struggling to keep up and I had to slide my mouth free to swallow. Another shot hit my chin as I pulled my mouth free. I moaned, rubbing my mouth and chin and cheek over the sensitive, vulnerable head of Aury’s cock as he continued coming, making low, desperate, breathless sounds above me.

The lower half of my face was covered when he finally stopped. We were both panting hard, and Aury was still shuddering with pleasure as he collapsed back against the headboard, chest heaving. I licked my lips to get more of his taste, shivering when my cock bucked between my legs, wanting attention again. I ignored it. I got the feeling we weren’t going to be stopping just yet—not if Aury was experiencing the same urgent, desperate need that still swirled inside me, tempered only momentarily by what we’d just done.

I leaned over and grabbed a tissue from the nightstand to wipe my face, smiling with satisfaction as Aury lounged back against the headboard,

watching me through glazed, sated eyes. As soon as I dropped the tissue, he pulled me into a kiss, wrapping his arms around me and tugging until I was straddling his lap.

I *mmm*'ed into his mouth, settling my arms around his neck. Distracted by Aury's mouth, I only vaguely noticed the brush of his wings against my elbows, and something that felt almost like cartilage against my inner wrists, before—

"Ow." I jerked my arms back as I broke the kiss. When I looked down at my left wrist, there was a line of blood droplets welling.

Aury's breath left him in a rush as he stared, a look of horror dawning in his black eyes. "I'm sorry." He sounded anguished.

"No, no." I shook my head, grabbing another tissue and pressing it to my wrist, because I could tell the sight of my blood was devastating him. It wasn't even all that much—the same amount that welled when I accidentally stuck myself with a needle while sewing. "I forgot about your, um…" I gestured. "Neck things."

Aury shook his head, fingers tightening on my hips. "I'm sorry, Gage—"

"Hey." I leaned forward and planted a firm kiss on his mouth. "It's nothing. I mean it. Now I know to be careful, that's all."

I kissed him again, partly to distract him and partly because I just wanted to. It worked, because Aury made a soft noise into my mouth and sank his tongue inside. I shivered, because it felt so different. Slightly thinner, longer, and when the tip of my tongue stroked between the twin points, Aury shivered with sensitivity.

Aury's hands slid around and down to cup my ass. My stomach dipped at the feel, cock twitching, still sensitive where it brushed against his tight stomach. Aury's long fingers moved, stroking, and when they dipped closer to my hole, I shuddered. It been a long, long time since anyone—myself included—had played with my ass. I wondered if Aury was interested in anything like that.

We kissed for endless moments. I didn't want to stop, a part of me still unable to believe that this had happened. Was happening. I was kissing Aury. I was sitting in his lap. We were both naked. We'd just made each other come.

I shivered as my tongue slicked against his. I wanted to make him come again.

But Aury’s kisses gentled, then slowed, before he pulled away after a final press of his lips to nuzzle my cheek. “You’re wonderful,” he murmured against my skin.

I made a face, but still basked in his attention and soft touches. “I’m really not,” I told him, running my palms up and down his chest and over the slope of his shoulders.

“You are.” Aury rolled us until I was on my back on the bed and he was looming over me, his wings a dark mass behind him, those long, deadly talons curving over his shoulders. They should have made me nervous, but I knew Aury was careful. I trusted him.

He leaned down to kiss me, grinning against my mouth. “You are,” he repeated. “You’re kind, and you’re beautiful.”

He trailed his lips along my jaw to kiss my neck. I shivered when his tongue slicked over my skin. “And you taste so good.” His nose followed the curve of my throat. “You smell perfect.”

I was pretty sure I was none of those things, but I didn’t argue again, because I could tell where this was heading when Aury’s tongue connected with my chest and began travelling south. My cock, still hard, bucked against my stomach eagerly. Aury must have noticed, because he grinned up at me as he made his way down my body.

I couldn’t help but grin back, something like joy bubbling up in my chest.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

I groaned as I blinked my eyes open the next morning, my lids too heavy and gritty with sleep. I was nothing but a boneless heap on the bed, my muscles aching in a very specific way that brought back memories of last night in a rush.

I smiled into the pillow, sprawled on my stomach, and tried to force my eyes to stay open. The room was bright—far brighter than it would be if it was dawn, which meant I was way behind the schedule I'd promised Anchor.

Worry about pissing her off started rising in my gut, making my limbs tense up. But then I felt movement on the bed behind me, before warm lips pressed into my shoulder. I melted back into the mattress, sweet pleasure chasing away the more unpleasant feelings until I couldn't bring myself to care. Anchor could wait. Moth could wait. For once, I was going to do what I wanted.

"Good morning." Aury's voice reverberated against my shoulder, making me shiver. I felt strands of his soft hair brush my skin, and despite how late we'd stayed up, my cock twitched and hardened in a rush.

After going down on each other again, we'd kissed and touched lazily for a long while until we were both hard and aching once more. This time, I'd straddled Aury's thighs and we'd jerked each other off, because I'd been dying to actually see his cock spurt his release. Amazingly, despite coming twice already, he'd still shot an insane amount all over his stomach and chest, making my mouth water until I'd licked it up.

The memory of it made my own dick pulse against the bed, wetting the sheet as pre-cum leaked. Apparently, I had a cum fetish—that was new knowledge for me.

A bolt of lust tightened my gut when I felt Aury's hard cock brush against my thigh and the curve of my ass, already leaking as well and leaving a wet trail on my skin. But then he draped himself over me and rested his cheek between my shoulder blades with a sigh.

"Please don't go out there, Gage," he murmured, long fingers tracing absentminded patterns over the small of my back and swell of my ass, making me shiver with sensitivity.

I exhaled, staring at the wall. “Trust me, I wish I didn’t have to.” I shifted back, closer to Aury’s warmth until our legs tangled together.

His words had broken me out of my sleepy, lust-drunk haze. The realisation that I’d be back out in the Wastes, probably in less than an hour, hit me like a bowling ball thudding into the pit of my stomach.

I groaned low, burying my face back into the pillow. “I need to get up and get moving. Shouldn’t waste daylight.”

Aury made an unhappy noise and nuzzled his nose against my back. “I could come with you—”

“No.” That made me turn, and Aury moved as I rolled onto my back so I could look up at him. The sight of his big black eyes, with those faint swirls of colour, made my chest get tight. “You need to stay here. You’re safe here.”

Maybe if I said it enough, he’d stay for a long time.

In the end, I didn’t rush, even though the anxiety at the thought of Anchor being annoyed with me steadily increased the longer I took, like a buzzing at the back of my skull getting louder and louder. Aury and I kissed for long moments in bed until we reluctantly got up and dressed. I went and retrieved Aury’s coat from his room for him when he asked. I got the feeling he didn’t like having his back exposed, but I wasn’t sure if it was because of the scars or the barbs lining his spine.

Fully aware that I was just delaying the inevitable, I asked Aury if he wanted to come meet the girls while I fed and watered them. He nodded but looked a little panicky, like it was some grand milestone in… whatever this was between us. It made me laugh and go up on my toes to kiss him. I was still riding my orgasm high from the night before, and it was making me bolder than normal.

After Aury stole a final kiss, I pulled on my mask and gloves. I was nervous as we stepped outside into the cool sunlight, half expecting to find Anchor waiting angrily at my door, demanding I get out there and start looking for Moth. But there was no one around. I glanced up and saw a raider on the camp wall, keeping watch. For the first time in hours, I remembered Mary and her monster pets, just on the other side of the wall. I wondered what she was doing.

I led Aury around to my little yard at the back of my room, feeling guilty that I was late letting the girls out of their coop for the day. I carried the small basket I used to collect their eggs, and I handed it to Aury as I unlocked the padlock on the gate.

He clutched the basket, following me silently into the yard, and hovered a few paces back as I crouched down to flip the little wooden latch that held the coop hatch closed. I stood up and stepped back, giving the girls time to make their way out.

Bianca poked her head out first, giving me an indignant squawk at being kept waiting before she scurried down the little ramp, feet scratching against the wood. The others followed moments later.

"Hello, ladies," I said, wondering how they were going to react to Aury. He was a monster, after all. Some animals from this world reacted badly to monsters, instinctive fear keeping them wary.

That wasn't the case with the hens. They flocked to him, pecking around his feet. I didn't ask if it was the wings and bird feet that made them like him, in case he found it offensive. But the sight of him tentatively crouching down and reaching out to brush fingertips over Trixie's feathers made my chest get tight and warm.

I took the basket from him and stuck my head in the coop to collect their eggs. By the time I re-emerged, Aury was sitting cross-legged on the dry ground, Pearl in his lap.

I let out a rusty laugh. "Wow, they like you, huh?"

Aury grinned up at me, his smile blindingly brilliant in the dappled sunlight.

"Ghost?" I turned and saw Rig sticking his head out of his bedroom window. "You're still here? Oh, thank fuck. Wait there." He disappeared.

While I waited, I topped up the hens' water with my canteen and scattered feed from the wooden box tucked in the corner of the yard. Rig pushed his way through the wire gate a minute later, still adjusting his mask on his face.

"I'm leaving soon," I told him, feeling like I needed to defend myself. Like I was being lazy or negligent for still being there when I should be out looking for Moth already.

But Rig shook his head. "No need. Moth showed up a little while ago, but we thought you'd already left." His eyes cut over to Aury, then darted back to me as he suppressed a smile behind his mask. "Morning, Aury."

“Good morning,” Aury said in his quiet voice, stroking long fingers through Pearl’s feathers. She preened, clearly in heaven. I could relate.

I wasn’t jealous of a chicken. No way. I turned back to Rig, relief making me smile. “Good job I slept in, huh?”

Rig snorted, raising a dark brow at me, making my face get hot. “Yeah, slept in.” He jerked his chin in the general direction of the diner. “You should probably go let Anchor know you’re here.”

I exhaled. “I guess.” Couldn’t I just go and hide back in my room with Aury?

“You should get some breakfast too,” Rig said to me. “I’ll keep Aury company for a while.”

I nodded, forcing myself not to gaze back at Aury with a longing expression. “Any news about Mary and her pets?”

Rig shook his head. “I went up there earlier to take a look. The beastie with the cage moved the RV closer to the trees last night so that the two big ones could eat. They’re stripping the leaves.” His eyes crinkled as he smiled behind his mask. “They’re kind of cute. I mean, as cute as something that looks a bit like a ball sac with arms and horns can be.”

I shuddered at that visual. “Your brain is fucked up, Rig.”

He snickered. “Go on, get it over with.”

I nodded, then turned and smiled at Aury from behind my mask. “Um, see you later.”

He grinned up at me, gently setting Pearl down before rising to his feet. He carefully brushed the dirt from his new coat. “Yes. See you later.”

I could feel Rig’s eyes gleefully watching us, so I turned and walked out of the yard, giving him a weak, affectionate shove on my way.

As I made my way across the camp to the diner, I looked back up at the top of the camp wall. Lilac was up there, identifiable by his black hair pulled into its high ponytail. He was looking down at something in his hands. Probably whittling again.

I let out a breath as I approached the diner, nerves swirling. I could see Anchor in there, elbow resting on the counter, and Moth’s distinctive white hair where he leaned against the far wall. Ugh.

When I entered the diner, Anchor turned, her eyes widening in surprise. “Ghost, you’re still here. That’s lucky.” She shot me a tentative smile behind her mask and nodded over at Moth. “Look who showed up this morning.”

My eyes went to the tall motherfucker. His long, leanly muscled frame was relaxed; wide shoulders resting casually against the wall behind him, arms folded over his chest.

Moth shot me the tiniest smirk, the metal adorning his mouth—a ring through the centre of his lower lip, and two either side of his cupid's bow—barely moving. "Ghost." He inclined his head a fraction, causing a lock of pure white hair to fall from behind his ear over his cheekbone.

Seeing as it was just us in the room, I didn't worry about staying polite. "Shithead." I kept my tone conversational as I nodded back at him while I carried the basket of eggs over to the counter.

Moth's lips twitched, but the only other movement he made was to shift his sly eyes to Anchor.

She was rolling her own over her mask. "Come on, boys."

"You mean 'come on, *Ghost'*." Moth flicked that errant lock of hair back. "I've been nothing but polite," he added, his voice smooth as he shot me a tiny smirk.

"I know you don't see eye to eye—"

"I have no problem with Ghost." Moth's eerily pale eyes were piercing as they stared me down. I refused to look away first, even as my fists clenched.

"You left me surrounded by a pack of beasties," I said through gritted teeth. "I nearly died!"

I didn't add that, up until the point Moth left me alone to fend off half a dozen creatures that had looked like a cross between a garden gnome and an ant, we'd been kind of… flirting. And my ego was evidently so fragile that I still couldn't decide which had offended me more. The abandonment in the face of death, or the sudden ghosting—the irony didn't escape me—from a guy who I'd been pretty sure had been eager to give me a blow job.

Moth rolled his eyes. "You weren't going to die. God, Ghost, you're such a baby sometimes."

"I am not!" I immediately flushed beneath my mask at how whiny that came out. "Fuck you, asshole—"

"Enough!" Anchor sounded exasperated. "I swear to god, you guys are like children."

Moth and I both shut up at that, scowling at each other. His was more impactful, much to my irritation, seeing as he didn't have a mask in the way.

“Where’s Rig?” Anchor asked.

I swallowed convulsively, forcing my eyes to stay fixed on her and not dart nervously over to Moth. Because Rig was with Aury, and there were several reasons I didn’t want Moth to meet Aury. Not the least being that Moth was objectively hot as hell and I was already pathetically insecure over my ability to hold Aury’s interest.

Plus, they had that monster thing in common. Well, half, in Moth’s case.

“He, um, he’s just with Aury,” I told Anchor.

I’d thought just saying his name would be harmless, but apparently not. Moth jolted like someone had shocked him, finally straightening up from his cocky slump against the wall.

“Aury?” he echoed.

Anchor was speaking again, but I couldn’t hear her as I watched Moth. What little colour there’d been in his pale face drained. I saw his tattooed fingers twitch, like he wanted to reach for the sword strapped to his back.

Seriously, what kind of asshole carried a *sword*?

“Aury,” Moth repeated, voice faint, cutting off Anchor. “Aury… is here?”

I tensed up further, shoulders bunching. “You know him?”

Anchor was silent, staring at Moth. He shook his head once, lips thinning. “I know *of* him. Every monster does. He’s the rycke.”

He pronounced it *reek*. I’d never heard of it.

There was a moment of silence, in which I knew for a fact that Anchor was considering whether to show Moth even a hint of weakness by admitting our ignorance. Even though she turned to him for help sometimes, we all knew he couldn’t be fully trusted.

Eventually, she spoke. “What is a rycke?”

Moth’s arms were hanging by his sides now, fingers curling into loose fists. “One of the deadliest species of monster there is.” He ground his teeth together, as though he didn’t want to admit the next part. “One feared almost universally by all others.”

Anchor and I stared at him in silence, before slowly looking at each other. I think pure shock was the only thing that stopped us from bursting out laughing.

Aury? One of the *deadliest* and *most feared* monsters in existence?

Aury was gentler than every human I’d ever met in my life, let alone monster.

“Right. Well.” Anchor sounded uncertain. “Aury is… different, then. I guess?” She looked at me for reassurance.

I nodded in agreement and shot Moth an odd look. “Aury is…” Perfect? Beautiful? The gentlest soul I’d ever met, who made me yearn for things I hadn’t known I wanted? “…Fine,” I finished lamely.

“There’ve been no sightings of him for nearly fifteen years.” Moth looked agitated. Nervous. The sight of it shouldn’t have filled me with a hint of smug satisfaction, but it did.

I glanced at Anchor, and we silently communicated our agreement to tell Moth as little as possible. He didn’t need to know Aury had been held by the military. He could probably come to that conclusion on his own, but he wasn’t going to get any confirmation from us.

“Well, he’s here now,” Anchor said, making her tone dismissive like she’d grown bored of talking about this. “Ghost, go and get Rig, would you?”

I nodded and slipped out of the room, grateful for the few moments to collect my thoughts—and maybe tell Aury to stay in his room while Moth was here. I bumped into Rig a few moments later, already on his way to the diner, and in low, hushed tones summed up the conversation I’d just had. He spun on his heel, and we quickly walked to Aury’s room.

When we stepped inside, Aury’s head jerked up from the book he’d been poring over. His eyes lit up when he saw me, a small, shy smile turning up the corners of his mouth before his head twitched slightly. The smile and nervous tic both made my heart freaking melt.

“Hello, Ghost.” His low, soft voice washed over me. “Hello, Rig. Again. That was quick.”

“Aury, you know I was telling you about our visitor? Moth?” Rig strode over to where Aury was sitting and leaned against the side of the table beside him. Meanwhile, I took a single step closer, nerves overtaking me. The time apart from Aury, though brief, had made me feel almost shy in his presence again. I had a sudden memory of the night before, of looking down and seeing Aury’s big black eyes gazing back up at me from between my legs. I went hot all over.

In answer to Rig’s question, Aury nodded, long fingers gently closing his book to give Rig his full attention. He folded his hands in his lap and sat silently, watching Rig with big, patient eyes. God, he was so beautiful.

“Well he’s… uh…” Rig glanced over at me. “He’s… heard of you.”

Aury's head cocked in a bird-like movement. "Heard of me?"

Rig looked over at me again, so I finally took a few more steps closer. "He's kind of… scared of you," I admitted. Aury looked shocked. "Apparently your species is known for being particularly, um, deadly and fearsome."

"I mean, it sounds like bullshit to me." Rig raised his hands in an 'I don't buy it' gesture. "I don't mean that offensively, Aury, but you're just… you. You're not fearsome."

"I don't want to hurt anyone," Aury said, his low voice sounding unsettled. "I swear it."

"We believe you." Rig reached out and rested his hand on Aury's shoulder, and my own fingers twitched with their desire to touch him. God, I wanted to touch him again so badly. Even just an innocent touch like that. Anything. "But maybe it's best if you stay out of Moth's way while he's here. He shouldn't be here long, but we—"

"I'm not going to hurt him. I promise." Aury's voice had an edge of raw desperation, like he thought we were going to lock him away. "I swear it. Please don't—I won't—"

"We know." I stepped forward again and, finally gathering my courage, squatted down beside Aury's seat, resting one gloved hand on the table for balance. My knee cracked on the way down, sounding loud in the room. "We know you won't hurt anyone, Aury. And we promise we're not locking you up *anywhere*. You can go wherever you want in the camp. But we don't want *you* to get hurt. We don't want to risk you. Okay?"

I was aching to rest my hand on his knee, and I might have even found the courage to do it if Rig hadn't been there. But he was, so even as Aury's big, dark eyes stared into mine, I didn't move.

Finally, he nodded.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Rig's fingers flex as he squeezed Aury's shoulder before releasing his hand. "Thank you, Aury. We gotta go talk to Moth and Anchor now, but we'll be back soon. Sit tight, 'kay?"

Aury nodded, watching us silently as we left the room. Everything in me told me to turn back around and stay with him. Wrap him in my arms. Hide under the covers with him, back in our own little world like we'd been last night.

"So," Rig began in a cheery, conversational tone as we headed to the diner, "is there a reason you were just pretending like you and Aury hadn't

spent all of last night fucking each other's brains out?"

It took a second for his words to register, but when they did, my face flamed. "I—what—" I stuttered, and Rig snickered.

"Took you freaking long enough, my *god*," he griped in a mock-exasperated voice, reaching over and thumping my arm. "Hope it was worth the wait. Certainly sounded it."

"We didn't actually—" I stopped myself, no idea why I had the urge to clarify what Aury and I had gotten up to the night before. Instead, I glared at him. "What the hell do you mean, *took me long enough*? Aury's been here, like, a week!"

"Yeah, a week of you two gazing longingly at each other like a couple of lovesick teenagers." Rig snorted. "I was embarrassed *for* you."

"Shut up, dork." My face was on fire.

"Oh my god, relax, Ghost. I'm *kidding*." Rig wrapped an arm around my neck and jerked me into him. "I'm happy for you. You two are so cute it makes my teeth hurt. And I would be a terrible friend if I didn't encourage you to keep doing whatever it was you two were doing last night, because by the sounds of it, it was exquisite. Please, keep having as much freaky monster sex as you can. I'm living vicariously through you."

I paused at that, quirking a brow at him. "You wish you were having freaky monster sex, huh?"

Rig went pink behind his mask, and he released me quickly. "No, I didn't mean—Just sex in general. Obviously. Not that I have anything against monsters, or anything. I mean, some of them are—I just meant—" He cleared his throat. "We better hurry, Anchor's waiting."

We reached the diner and Rig yanked the door open, slipping inside before I could say anything else.

Interesting.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When Rig and I stepped back into the diner, Moth straightened up from the wall.

"So… you were really just with the rycke?" he asked, and my stomach dipped until I realised he was talking to Rig, not me. Wasn't like he could have known that I'd spent the night doing—

"Aury. Yeah." Rig sounded wary.

Moth was staring at us with an odd mixture of horror and awe on his face, like he couldn't believe we were dumb enough to be so casual about hanging out with Aury, while also being a little bit jealous that we got to.

Honestly, thinking of what he had said about ryckes—about Aury—seemed laughable to me. "If ryckes are really that… terrifying," I said, my tone making it clear I thought it was bullshit, "why haven't we heard about it before? We know about other dangerous monster species out here."

Moth blinked and leaned back against the wall, but it seemed to me like he was trying very hard to appear casual. His tone was dismissive when he spoke. "Humans are barely making do out here, with their half-baked ideas about monsters and rudimentary knowledge at best. No offence," he added after a pause. "Besides, they're all obsessed with the Soul Eater, even in the cities. Let *him* take the flack."

A shiver ran up my spine at the mention of the Soul Eater. He was infamous across the Wastes—the ghoulish figure that appeared every few years and slaughtered at random, sucking people dry until they were just withered husks. I'd heard rumours about him wiping out entire raider camps in a single night.

Moth exhaled a hard breath. "The rycke is… They're just terrifying, alright? Unpredictable. Chaotic. It's safer to just never be near them."

Rig and I shot each other a look above our masks. "Sure," I said, and saw Moth roll his eyes.

"Whatever. Your funeral. But I'm not sticking around while he's here."

"Shame," I sniped, knowing he'd be able to sense my scathing smile even behind my mask.

He shot me one back, but then it turned into a smirk as he raised an imperious brow at me. "So. You wanted me?"

I barely resisted the urge to flip him off.

Anchor gave him an exasperated look. “You didn’t notice the RV parked up outside our camp on your way in?”

“Oh, that.” Moth’s lazy drawl made me grit my teeth. “Uh-huh.”

There was a moment of silence. “So… we don’t know what to do about it.” Anchor said, voice stilted, like she hated admitting ignorance over anything.

“Well, who’s in the RV?”

“She said she’s called Mary,” I told him in a clipped voice. “She has several monsters with her. And they don’t appear to be with her of their own free will. Except maybe that weird little one,” I added in a mutter.

“I’ve heard the name.” Moth’s voice was grim and suddenly, uncharacteristically serious.

Anchor eyed him, folding rangy arms over her chest. “Not good, I’m guessing?”

Moth shook his head, that errant tendril of white hair brushing his forehead with the motion. “I’ve heard rumours that she collects monsters. To show off at some mansion she’s taken over out here.”

I stared at him in horror. “*Collects* them? Why would she do that?”

Moth shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m only *half* human. You tell me why you all do such weird, dumb shit. Maybe she sees it as a status symbol. Maybe it’s a fetish. I’ve heard some dark stories around her—about her and her rich friends forcing monsters to fight or fuck for their entertainment.”

My gorge rose. “That’s disgusting.”

“Yeah.” Moth’s pierced lips pursed into a thin line. “It is.”

“But how?” Anchor asked, dark bushy brows drawn low in a frown. “How does she even capture beasties? The ones with her now—two are just huge. Like, elephant huge. And then there’s that big guy who looks… just dangerous. He actually scares me, and I’ve seen all kinds of beasties out here.”

“He carries a war hammer that’s so heavy, he can’t even pick it up off the ground while he walks,” I told Moth. With a grimace, I added, “But something tells me he can swing it pretty well if he wants to.”

Moth nodded. “So he’s big? What does he look like? I didn’t see him on my way in. Just the two borolesh.”

“Grey skin that’s got, like, ridges on it,” Rig answered before I could. “Tall. Strong.”

When I turned to eye him with interest, his face went pink. “But he’s got a cage over his head, so hard to tell,” he carried on, studiously ignoring my gaze burning holes into the side of his face.

“He scares me,” Anchor admitted. “He looks mean.”

“He doesn’t—” Rig stopped himself after he shot me a glance and went bright red.

Payback’s a bitch, huh? I wanted to tease him, but it wasn’t the time. Especially as, a moment later, the diner door squeaked as it opened.

“Saw Moth was here.” Cutter’s raspy voice made my shoulders hunch up. He sneered Moth’s name like it was an insult. “So I assumed we’d be having a camp meeting about the freakshow outside.”

When I reluctantly turned to look at him, he was staring at Anchor with a combative, narrow-eyed expression. “Unless you’re hiding something, Anchor?”

“I’m not hiding anything,” she replied quickly, but I could tell Cutter had thrown her off. “That’s fine. Get everyone in here, except those keeping watch.”

“No need, they’re already coming.” Cutter’s voice was mockingly cheerful as he nodded toward the raiders approaching the diner.

“Lovely.” Moth’s voice was dry. “A team meeting. Just what I was hoping for when I decided to stop by the camp.”

My mouth twitched with the beginnings of a reluctant smile, but I fought it off with a self-conscious glance at Moth, glad my mask hid it. I cleared my throat and folded my arms over my chest, trying to look casual as the other raiders started filing into the room.

Only a few greeted Moth—Apollo, Daisy, Bo and Nun. Most didn’t trust him, or were just wary of him because of his monster roots. I felt a twinge of sympathy and tried to ignore it. Maybe people would treat him better if he didn’t leave them for dead, surrounded by a pack of beasties out in the Wastes.

“Okay, everyone.” Anchor looked around the expectant group. “Moth here has heard of Mary before, and it’s not great. Apparently, she likes collecting monsters to… I don’t know, put on shows or something?”

She looked askance at Moth, who nodded.

“Right.” She still sounded doubtful. “So she obviously isn’t… the nicest person.”

“But what does she want with us?” another raider, Keen, asked. His blonde brows furrowed above his blue mask. “Why’s she parked up right outside?”

“Maybe she wants supplies,” Rusty offered. “Food or water?”

Moth coughed out an infuriatingly patronising laugh. My eyes narrowed at him, but I stayed silent. Luckily, someone else asked.

“What?” Cutter demanded, his tone combative.

Moth rolled pale eyes. “Isn’t it obvious?”

When no one said anything, he straightened up and slowly looked at us all with an incredulous expression. “You’ve got the damn rycke in your camp.”

“What’s a—” somebody started to ask, but I interrupted before they could finish.

“What’s Aury got to do with it?” I fired back. There was an obvious defensive edge to my voice that I couldn’t keep out, but dread was creeping its way into my gut.

Moth shot me a look like I was a moron. “You seriously haven’t considered that Mary is here *because* of Aury?”

“How would she even know he was here?” Rig asked, tone disbelieving.

“I don’t know,” Moth shot back, “but from what I’ve heard—and already told you—she collects monsters. Rare ones. Powerful ones. The rycke is like, the ultimate version of *both* of those things.”

“So what—” Rig cleared his throat. “What about that big guy she has with her? He looks stronger than Aury—”

“It sounds like he’s an aytorin, so yes, he’s strong.” Moth shoved an agitated hand, covered in those weird, intricate tattoos, through his silvery-white hair. “But just trust me on this—Aury is *the strongest monster you will ever encounter.* I don’t get why that’s so hard for you to understand.”

When no one said anything, Moth continued. “If Mary *is* somehow aware that Aury is here, plus she’s figured out how to control an aytorin, then I’m going to take a wild guess that she wants to add the rycke to her collection.”

“Oh, okay.” Rig affected a sardonic tone of sudden enlightenment. “So she’s pure evil, then. Cool, cool.”

But I couldn’t laugh. As Moth’s words sank in, worry for Aury flooded through my system. What if that *was* what she wanted? What if she wanted to chain Aury up like the aytorin and keep him with her?

What if she was trying to take him right now, while we were all distracted? Pure terror stabbed through my body like shards of ice, and I tensed up, ready to turn and sprint from the room. To run to Aury and keep him safe. Somehow.

Before I could move, Rig grabbed my shoulder and dug his fingers in hard. “Don’t show Moth more than he needs to see,” he murmured in my ear, and I blinked in confusion. “If he’s worked this out, what’s to stop him running to Mary and making a deal with her? I know you don’t trust him any more than me, Ghost. Be smart. Don’t give him leverage.”

“Aury is on his own,” I hissed back, keeping my voice low. “What if he —”

“There’s no way anyone would be able to sneak into this camp, and if they were smashing their way through to get him, we’d hear it. Aury is safe. We’ll go to him as soon as we’re done here. Okay?”

He released my shoulder and leant back out of my space. I was still tense, and it only got worse when Cutter spoke.

“I can’t believe this.” All eyes turned to him, and I wanted to shrink back when I realised he was already staring at me, rage bleeding into his gaze. “You’re saying this fucking idiot brought the most dangerous monster in the Wastes *into our camp*?”

I went hot all over, eyes darting self-consciously over the raiders who were staring at me. “I—”

“Shut the hell up, Cutter,” Rig snapped, placing a protective hand on my shoulder. “It wasn’t just Ghost. I was there too. And Moth didn’t say *dangerous*, he said *strongest*. You’re telling me you don’t want the *strongest* monster to be part of our camp, protecting us?”

“You’re a goddamn moron if you think that thing is going to protect us from anything,” Cutter snarled.

“Shut up,” I bit out, and even Moth looked surprised at my outburst, his dark brows hiking up. My face was hot, but I didn’t let it stop me. “He’s not a thing. He’s a better person than you’ll ever be, asshole. He would never hurt any of us.”

“You think I’m going to listen to *you*?” Cutter shot me a disgusted look. “The guy who’s been hiding the monster away in his room? I don’t even want to think about what you’ve been getting up to with it at night, you sick fuck. Is that why you brought it back here with you? Getting a bit desperate, were you?”

“Shut up.” My face burned; jaw clenching so hard it felt like my teeth would crack. I could feel Moth’s eyes searing into my face. I refused to look over at him.

“You’re such a bigoted asshole, Cutter,” Rig gritted out. “Leave Ghost alone and leave Aury alone.”

“So I should just leave alone the goddamn idiot who brought a dangerous monster into our camp, which has attracted *more* dangerous monsters and some psycho bitch who likes to collect them?” Cutter looked around at the other raiders with hiked brows. “Tell me I’m not the only one angry about this?”

“You’re not,” someone said in a hushed tone, but I couldn’t bring myself to look around and see who. I felt frozen to the spot. My face still burned behind my mask, eyes watering with furious, impotent frustration.

“Aury’s not dangerous,” Rig said. “He—”

“He is,” Moth interrupted in an uncharacteristically quiet, solemn voice. My eyes stung as they met his, and I hated the faint pity I could see there. “He is, Ghost. I know that’s not what you—”

“Shut up, Moth.” My gloves creaked as I fisted my hands by my sides.

He watched me for long moments, then shrugged and stepped back to lean once more against the wall, as if to say, ‘this isn’t my problem’. I knew I was being a jerk, but I felt backed into a corner. Like Rig and I were a pathetic little army of two facing down an entire legion as everyone stared at me in silence.

“Look.” Anchor’s voice was firm. She stepped forward to get everyone’s attention. “I understand it’s unnerving for some of you to have a beastie in the camp. Especially after hearing what Moth has said. But Aury has done *nothing* wrong. He hasn’t done anything that would suggest he’s violent, or angry, or preparing to tear this camp apart in a rampage.”

“So that’s our baseline now, is it?” Cutter asked in a flat voice. “It hasn’t killed us all *yet*.”

“I’m not kicking him out just because he’s a beastie,” Anchor said through clenched teeth, “which is what you want me to do.”

“You’re saying that as though it’s an unreasonable request.” Cutter sounded disbelieving, like he truly couldn’t understand Anchor’s point. “You just said it yourself—that thing is a *monster*. Have you *seen* it? Even with the damaged wing, it’s covered in talons and barbs. It’s a walking weapon!”

“Enough!” Anchor barked. “I’m not kicking Aury out just because he looks different to you, Cutter. Do you even hear yourself?”

My heart rate decreased at her words, and a rush of gratitude toward Anchor went through me. At least *she* wasn’t a bigoted asshole.

“When I had to treat Aury’s leg, he had every opportunity to lash out,” Apollo piped up. “He didn’t even make a sound, didn’t lash out at all, even though he was in a lot of pain. That monster is not violent.”

I glanced at Moth and could see, as he pursed his lips, that he disagreed. But I didn’t point it out, because I didn’t want anyone else siding with him. Besides, Moth didn’t know Aury. I did. Rig did. Granted, we hadn’t for that long, but I’d been with him almost constantly, bar a day, since meeting him. I *knew* him.

“He seems sweet,” Daisy offered. She was watching me carefully. “Quiet and polite, every time I’ve offered him food. But he won’t eat!” She threw her hands up as though personally offended by Aury’s lack of a need to eat.

My lips twitched behind my mask. “He doesn’t eat, Daisy. It’s not that he doesn’t like your cooking.”

She tutted and busied herself behind the counter.

“We took a vote about this,” Anchor said, voice weary. “And it was agreed that Aury could stay. Moth, do you…”

She turned to him, eyes uncertain, before trailing off as her gaze flicked over to me. I wondered what she’d been about to say. Probably ‘do you think we shouldn’t let him stay’? Panic flittered in my chest. Was she going to listen to him, after all this?

Moth looked at me for a moment, before his pale eyes cut back over to Anchor. He shrugged. “Nothing to do with me. If you want to let the rycke stay here, that’s your call.”

Anchor looked worried. Cutter’s denim jacket rustled as he straightened and stomped to the door. “This is bullshit. You’re going to get us all killed, Anchor.”

The door squeaked behind him, uncomfortably loud in the pressing silence. I saw other raiders looking at each other uncertainly. Then one or two of them sidled to the door and followed him.

Anchor exhaled heavily. Rig shifted beside me, his arm brushing my sleeve. Before I could stop myself, I asked the question that had been

gnawing at me throughout this whole conversation. “You keep saying *the* rycke.”

Moth eyed me. “Yeah.”

A pause. “So… what do you mean?” I folded my arms over my chest. “Aury is *the* rycke, you said. Is he… the only one? How?”

Moth shifted. “Ryckes are… Humans have the stories of the phoenix, right? Well, the rycke is born from the remains of the last rycke. There’s only ever one.”

There was silence in the room as we all absorbed that. So Aury was the only rycke in existence, and only his death would birth another of his kind. My heart ached for him. It sounded so… lonely.

“That’s wild.” Rig’s voice burst through the silence.

I saw Apollo nod in agreement. “How does that work?” He sounded fascinated.

Moth let out a low, exasperated sound. “I’m not a freaking expert. I only know what I’ve… picked up. Heard.”

His pale cheeks flushed pink, like he hated pointing out how his monster kin had rejected him just as much as humans mostly had. I felt a flash of pity cut through my dislike for Moth. He straddled both worlds and didn’t fit in anywhere. We didn’t trust him, not after he’d abandoned me on a simple scouting trip—but that was his own doing. And I doubted beasties trusted him either, thanks to his human half.

When only silence greeted him, Moth rolled his eyes and went on. “When the rycke dies, its decaying body acts as the fertiliser for a…” He paused as if trying to find the right words. “Seed thing that it has inside it. Seed or egg. I’m not sure. But the new rycke is born from it.”

“So there’s no actual fertilisation to cause conception?” Apollo asked. “It’s more like… a clone.”

Moth shrugged. “I guess.” There was another pause. “Can we get back to the more pressing matter of the insane monster collector on your doorstep, though?” he then asked.

Moth’s pale eyes met mine for a moment and a little frisson of familiarity shot between us. We’d been growing close before he’d screwed me over. But, unsurprisingly, leaving me for dead was a pretty concrete deal-breaker. So I hardened my gaze as I stared back at him, and after a moment Moth dropped his eyes, long lashes shielding them from me as his lips pulled down.

“Well, the two issues *are* kind of connected, aren’t they?” We all turned to eye Rusty, whose blank white mask bobbed. “The beastie and Mary. She’s here because of him. Right?”

Stark fear made me go cold. I pictured Aury back in chains and felt ill at the thought. I couldn’t let that happen to him again.

“We don’t know that for certain,” Rig said. “We don’t even know if she’s aware he’s here.”

“I guess, but… the timing’s a little coincidental otherwise,” Apollo said, tone doubtful. “I agree with Moth. I think she knows Aury’s here and she wants to add him to… whatever weird monster collection she has.”

“We need to find out for certain. We need to just speak to her.” Anchor clearly didn’t like the idea. She looked at Moth. “Would you be willing to come with me and Ghost to talk to her? We’ll bring Lilac, just in case.”

“I’ll come too,” Rig said quickly, but I was too tense now to tease him about his little crush on the big grey beastie.

“That’s a bad idea,” I said. “If she wants unusual and rare monsters, and she realises Moth is half-monster…”

“Aw, I didn’t realise you cared, Ghost,” Moth drawled, blowing me a kiss. I flipped him off in return.

“Okay, so let’s go grab Lilac.” Anchor nodded at me. “No point putting it off. You ready?”

“Yeah,” I said, a rush of anxiety making me tense up. I looked at Rig, who nodded.

“I’ll just wait here.” Moth sidled up to the counter and slid onto one of the ancient bar stools, its once-red vinyl top faded pink and cracked. “Maybe the beautiful Daisy will be kind enough to feed a lonely wanderer who travels the dangerous Wastes…”

She snorted, reaching over the counter to thump his arm. “Your charms don’t work on me, blondie.” But a second later, she relented. “Fine, I’ll feed you.”

I rolled my eyes as we left the diner. I wanted to go and see Aury before we spoke to Mary, but Anchor was already whistling up to Lilac. She cupped her hands around her masked mouth and called up to him, telling him to meet us at the entrance.

As we passed the motel, I saw an opportunity to check on Aury before we left. “We need to go get our guns,” I said to Anchor, grabbing Rig’s sleeve and tugging him toward our rooms.

She stopped, but nodded, folding her arms over her chest. “Be quick.”

Damn it, I hadn’t been expecting her to wait outside our doors. I hesitated for a split second, then went into my room to grab my shotgun and crowbar. The gun was useless, but it gave us the appearance of strength. Rig’s pipe gun worked, at least, and Anchor had a small amount of ammo for her handgun. Lilac was scarily skilled with his machete.

I went still as I heard a faint sound from the yard out back that wasn’t one of the hens clucking. I had a sudden image of that creepy burgundy beastie Mary had been cradling, imagining it tearing apart my girls like a fox, and stumbled to the window.

My breath left me in a relieved rush when I stuck my head out and saw Aury sitting cross-legged on the ground, Sasha in his lap this time.

His face lit up when he saw me. “Ghost.”

I’d already noticed that he’d been careful to use my raider name when we were outside, or with others. It made the memory of him saying my real name even more intimate, and I shivered as I thought back to him groaning it in a lust-drenched voice the night before.

Aury looked a little sheepish. “I know I should stay in my room, but—”

“You’re fine here. You can stay here.” I smiled at him, then exhaled. “We’re going to speak to Mary to find out what she wants,” I told him, leaning as far out as the broken latch on my window would let me. Aury gently deposited Sasha on the ground and stood up, brushing off his coat as he walked over.

Worry pinched his brows. “Please be careful.”

I looked at him and just couldn’t match this sweet face to the description Moth had given for a rycke. *The* rycke. Aury’s eyes were big and mournful, although I’d seen them glow with happiness a few times now. The burn scars on the right side of his face were a glaring reminder of his vulnerability, as were the tattered remains of his right wing. The wounds and bruises from the chains on his arms had healed now, but I still remembered them. I still remembered the frightened, exhausted monster we’d found in that base, desperate for help.

Moth was wrong.

“I will,” I told Aury, wishing I could kiss him. Damn mask.

“Am I alright here?” he asked me. “With your ladies?” He gave me a slightly teasing smile that made my heart melt.

“Of course,” I told him. “Just make sure the gate’s shut so they can’t wander off.”

He nodded; expression serious like I’d given him a hugely important responsibility. It was adorable.

Before I could say anything else, Aury glanced around, then stepped forward and tugged my mask down with gentle, hurried motions. He kissed me soundly, a firm press against my mouth, before replacing my mask just as fast.

“I…” I blinked, licking my lips, dazed from the sweet, unexpected pleasure. “Um. See you later, then.”

“Yes.” Aury grinned at me.

As I turned back into my room and made my way to the door, I couldn’t stop smiling. Lust began to simmer, low and lazy in my belly, and I suddenly couldn’t wait until this evening. Until Aury and I could be alone together again, uninterrupted for hours.

But first, I had to go and find out what Mary wanted.

I met Anchor and Rig back out the front and we made our way to the container entrance, where Lilac was waiting for us already. We were all tense and silent on the short journey out of the camp and around the perimeter to Mary’s RV. Well, except for Lilac, who didn’t seem fazed in the slightest. He twirled his machete casually, and I saw Rig eyeing it with an uneasy expression. I wondered if he was worried that Lilac would hurt the big grey beastie.

“We’re not expecting this to get violent, are we?” I asked to try and put Rig at ease. He didn’t do well with violence anyway. Not that I did either, but at least my natural instinct was flight. Rig’s was freeze, which wasn’t good in the Wastes, where things tended to chase you.

“God, I hope not,” Anchor muttered as we rounded the corner of the wall and the RV came into sight.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Just as Rig had described, the RV had moved closer to the treeline at some point since Mary's arrival. The two big beasties—borolesh, Moth had called them—were still harnessed to the front of the vehicle, but now they could reach the trees. They were slowly lifting one big arm at a time to strip fistfuls of leaves from the branches, chewing lazily as they looked around with droopy beige eyes. They paid us no attention as we approached.

The other beastie—the aytorin—was already watching us. His skin was grey and mottled, and as we got closer I could see the ridges Rig had talked about. Thick, raised patterns under his skin, like there was cabling laid under there. He faced us, but I could see the black straps of a harness over his shoulders, and a thick metal chain drooping between his back and the motorhome. As we got closer, he casually swung his big war hammer up onto his shoulder with intimidating ease.

Beside me, Rig tugged on his fringed jacket and fiddled with his left glove, making sure it was snug over his fingers. I shot him an odd look but I was distracted when the RV door swung open with a rusty squeal.

Mary was wearing a red dress today, with a grey cardigan and matching red lipstick. Her dark hair looked smooth and neatly styled, but now that I was closer, I could see a few strands of grey streaking through it. I wondered how many clothes she had in that RV. These looked almost new, unlike our patched up, over-worn garments. Well, excluding Rig's western jacket, which he lovingly kept clean.

She was holding that creepy little burgundy creature again. Its smooth, pointed head swivelled excitedly, beady black eyes roaming over us all. Its bony legs shivered as it let out that awful chittering sound.

"Hello, pets." Mary gave us a condescending smile, smoothing stubby fingers over her pet monster's skull. "What can I do for you?"

We all eyed Anchor. She straightened and lifted her chin. "We want to know why you're really here."

Mary smiled again and parted her lips to speak, but Anchor went on before she could. "We know you're not just resting. You came here for a reason, otherwise you wouldn't be parked right outside."

Mary gave a tinkling little laugh, stroking painted fingernails lightly over the creature's skull. It let out that rattling sound again. "Alright, I suppose I wasn't the most subtle, was I?"

She quirked a thin, dark brow at us, her smile turning wry. "Have my monsters unnerved you?" she asked, then nodded at the silent aytorin, looming beside her. "Don't let the cage scare you. Trust me, he looks better with it. He's a big, ugly brute under there, aren't you, pet?"

I felt Rig bristle beside me, but he stayed quiet. The aytorin didn't react, his caged head not even moving an inch.

"He doesn't scare us," Anchor said, even though she'd told Moth and me that he did, less than an hour ago. "But you'll understand why we're not buying your story of just wanting to rest when you chose to stop here, right outside our camp."

Mary made a little agreeing sound in the back of her throat. "Let's go inside and have a chat."

Anchor stiffened. "We can talk out here."

Mary paused, then made a face like she found the idea distasteful. "Oh no, I don't spend much time outside. It's very bleak out here, isn't it? No, let's go inside. I'll make us some tea."

I couldn't tell if this woman was delusional or fucking with us. She turned and clomped back up the metal steps into the RV before Anchor could speak. Silence descended, broken only the rustle of the borolesh stripping the leaves from the trees, oblivious to our conversation.

"Watch her," Anchor murmured to Lilac, who gave a slight nod in response. She turned to me. "Let's get this over with."

I nodded. I really didn't want to go into this creepy woman's RV, but unless she was pointing a shotgun at us the moment we stepped inside, I wasn't worried about her hurting us. Lilac was fast and deadly, and I knew he'd be watching her—and her little pet—very, very carefully.

"Come on," I said to Rig.

"I'll stay out here," he answered, keeping his eyes firmly fixed on the two borolesh as though it was them he was fascinated by, and not the big, topless, muscular beastie wearing tight pants made of some kind of weird leather. The aytorin was silently watching us, the long, carved handle of his dauntingly huge war hammer still resting over his shoulder.

I could just about see the two spots of burning colour on Rig's cheekbones beneath his mask. I quirked a brow, but the worry for him

overrode any desire to tease him. “Are you sure?” I looked around. There was no movement on the horizon. “It’s not safe—”

“I have my gun,” Rig said, shooting me a quick smile, but I frowned at him. Rig had never shot the damn thing. He’d told me himself the thought of using it scared him shitless.

“I told Nun to keep an eye on us from the wall,” Lilac said in his flat voice. He jerked his masked chin up, and we all turned and looked up to see the tall, solid outline of the blonde raider standing with feet spread wide and her crossbow in her hands.

“She’s an excellent shot with her crossbow,” Lilac added with just as little inflection, but his eyes were focused on the aytorin. The beastie remained silent, even when his caged head turned slightly in Lilac’s direction, so at least we knew he was aware that Lilac was directing the pointed comment at him.

The sight of Nun keeping watch did make me feel much better, even though there wasn’t much she could do for us inside the RV. At least she could keep an eye on Rig.

“Stay alert,” I murmured, stepping close and resting my hand on Rig’s shoulder. He nodded and patted my side briefly.

I followed Anchor and Lilac to the RV door, giving the aytorin a wary final glance. Lilac went in first, still casually twirling his machete in his hand.

I shot a pointless glance back at the camp wall. I wondered if Aury was alright. Whether he was still with the hens. A tiny smile twitched my mouth behind my mask, but it dropped when I remembered Moth’s theory about why Mary was here. That she wanted to add Aury to her collection.

I gritted my teeth as I followed Anchor into the RV, and my eyes narrowed the moment they found Mary inside, picking up a whistling kettle from a little portable stove, a dish towel wrapped around the handle. Her creepy pet was curled up on the windowsill, gazing out at the Wastes, ignoring us.

Then my ears picked up something else that was so jarring and out of place, it made me freeze for a second.

Music. There was music coming from somewhere in here. I didn’t recognise the song, but it sounded scratchy and a little muffled. Looking around, I spotted an old record player tucked into the corner beside the sectional couch covered in a faded floral pattern.

I looked around again, frowning. A portable stove? A record player? Where was she getting power from? Then I spotted a generator out the window, around the far side of the RV, out of sight from where we'd been standing. It was solar-powered and looked brand new—like the kind of tech only the military had these days.

I looked back at Mary, staring hard at her. Make-up and nail polish. New clothes and electronics. What the hell?

Who was this woman?

"Look, this is… It's not like I have any right to tell you where you can and cannot stop in the Wastes," Anchor said. None of us sat down, even after Mary gestured at the long sectional couch and narrow benches either side of the table. The RV was pretty spacious, but it felt cramped with four of us inside.

Lilac and I watched in silence as Mary poured freshly boiled water into a mint-green teapot. After an awkward pause, Anchor continued. "But you've obviously sought our camp out for a reason, and I think we have a right to know what that reason is."

Mary tutted sympathetically as she retrieved four mugs from a cupboard. Two were covered in a paisley pattern, and one had the faded logo of a pre-monster engineering company. Only one, plain white, was chipped. I thought about the collection of mugs and cups we had in the diner. The last time I'd used one, I'd cut my lip on the jagged rim.

"Of course you do, pet," Mary said to Anchor. "Let's get settled with our tea and we can chat."

"We're not thirsty. Thank you." Anchor's voice was pointed.

"No?" Mary glanced up at me, then Lilac. Her gaze lingered on him longer, before sliding down to the machete he held in a loose, easy grip. "It's chamomile. Very calming."

"No. Thank you," Anchor repeated, steel in her voice.

Mary sighed and arranged the mugs and tea pot on a bamboo tray anyway. She carried it over to the small table as we all watched in silence. She slid into the booth and arranged the folds of her skirt, then beamed up at us.

"Take a seat."

Anchor shook her head. "I'd prefer to stand."

Mary tutted. "Don't be silly, pet. I'm not having a conversation with you while you and your… gentlemen friends loom over me like that. Take a

seat," she repeated, but this time there was a thin thread of steel underlying her tone.

Anchor hesitated. She took a step forward and lowered herself onto the bench opposite Mary with stilted movements. When she carefully laid her handgun in front of her on the table, fingers curled around the stock, Mary rolled her eyes and reached for the tea pot.

Lilac and I stayed where we were, but I cast a furtive look around. There was a hair curling wand discarded on a small side table in front of the creepy little monster, as well as a neat row of nail polish bottles in various colours, which I eyed longingly. An old revolver rested in front, gleaming and clearly well taken care of. A stack of dog-eared romance novels with dated covers showing swooning women and blond, beefy, long-haired men sat on a shelf built into the wall, mixed in with books on conflict resolution and mythology.

On the table beside the tray Mary had placed down was a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. *She must go into the cities*, I thought, but wondered how. They wouldn't let her in with monsters. Hell, they didn't let *anyone* in. Once you were out in the Wastes, you were stuck out here. We knew there were secret entrances that traders used to smuggle goods out into the Wastes, but I doubted Mary was happy to furtively sneak into a city on her own.

No, this looked more like she had some arrangement with the military. But I couldn't work out why, or how. Especially since, according to Moth, she just went around collecting monsters to put on shows for her and her rich friends. None of it made any sense.

"Please tell us why you're here," Anchor was saying, a hint of impatience creeping into her voice, "and we'll see if we can help you. We don't want any trouble."

"I'm not here to make trouble," Mary agreed, reaching for her cigarettes. "I have no business with you… I don't believe I caught your name."

Anchor hesitated for a moment. "Anchor," she eventually said. Wasn't like it was her real name, anyway.

Mary nodded, plucking a cigarette from the packet and lifting it to her painted lips between two stubby fingers. "I have no business with you or your camp, Anchor. But there just so happens to be something in there at the moment that I want." She lit the cigarette, the rasp of the flint catching filling the sudden quiet.

My stomach shrank into a painfully tight knot of worry. I shifted once on my feet, then made an effort to keep still, to not betray any of the nerves or worry now pulsing through my body.

Moth had been right. She was here for Aury.

“Oh?” Anchor’s tone was carefully light. “What’s that? We barely have enough to get by ourselves. I very much doubt we have anything of value in there.”

Mary looked at her with unnervingly shrewd eyes for a long moment as she took a drag of her cigarette. She broke her stare only to look over at her heavy marble ashtray as she dragged it closer to her across the table.

“Yes, you do,” she said, her voice no longer tinkling and saccharine as she tapped ash into the tray. “You know you do.”

“We really don’t.”

Mary just nodded and gave Anchor a condescending smile. “Yes, pet, you do. I want the monster you’re hiding in there.”

I pursed my lips tight behind my mask, feeling sweat bead on my hairline. Panic rose like a tidal wave, speeding up my heartrate, making my fingers twitch with an overwhelming desire to race out of here and find Aury. To lock him in my room and hide him away, even though that would make me no better than all these people who wanted to keep him chained up for their own gain.

“Monster?” Anchor was saying, doing a decent job of sounding confused. “We’re not—”

“I know the rycke is in there,” Mary interrupted, causing Anchor to fall silent. Her voice was hard now. “I know for a fact that it is in there, so there’s no point trying to deny it.”

She took another drag of her cigarette before setting it delicately down on the edge of the ashtray so she could pick up the tea pot. Despite the fact that we’d made it clear none of us would be drinking, she poured four cups.

“So really, what I’m saying is, you don’t need to worry. I’m not here for any business with your camp. I’ll just be taking the rycke when it leaves.”

My breaths were whistling out of my nose with panic, and I stared hard at the back of Anchor’s head, wishing I could see her expression. It would be so easy—too easy—for her to simply acknowledge Mary’s words and leave. To let Mary wait here to snatch up Aury. It would take away the stress of worrying about what Mary might do. It would be easy to turn a blind eye to what might happen to Aury when he left our camp.

I didn’t know what I could do—what I’d be able to do—but I wasn’t going to let him get captured and chained up again. I wasn’t.

“Taking him where?” Anchor asked in a quiet voice, and my panic ratcheted up worse, because it sounded like she was considering just going along with Mary’s plan.

Mary picked up her burning cigarette and waved it with a careless hand, sending a trail of grey smoke curling languidly through the air. “I have a nice little place further west where I keep a collection.”

“A collection?” Anchor repeated, sounding uneasy. “Of… of monsters?”

Mary let out a tinkling laugh. “Eccentric, I know. But honestly, pet, there’s not much to collect these days, is there? And my family have been collectors for longer than our history goes back. One of my great-grandfathers several generations back owned his own Egyptian mummy—isn’t that incredible?”

Anchor stiffened. “I don’t—”

“And these monsters are just so *fascinating*,” Mary continued, picking up her steaming mug. “The way they act and move and eat and fight. And other things,” she added in an amused, conspiratorial tone, like we were in on her sick joke. “People pay a lot of money to get to experience the Wastes and see actual monsters up close in a safe, controlled environment.”

“How is it safe and controlled?” Anchor asked, voice tight.

Mary took a sip of tea and set the mug down to chase it with a drag of her cigarette, which had nearly burned down to the butt. “Military escorts.” She tapped the side of her nose and winked at Anchor. “But that’s our little secret.”

We all stared at her in silence. I could tell even Lilac was somewhat surprised, though he didn’t show it. Although, *was* it a huge shock that the military would be doing something this sick? They were already capturing monsters and keeping them locked up, torturing them. It was only a small step further to let people witness them doing it.

For money, I assumed. “Why would the military do that?” I asked quietly, to confirm it.

Mary glanced at me for a brief, uninterested second. “It’s a joint venture,” she said dismissively as she stubbed out her cigarette. “Very profitable.”

Money then.

“Oh, don’t look so disgusted!” Mary picked up her tea. “Zoos were commonplace for decades before the monsters came. This is absolutely no different.”

“Zoos were awful, and this is too,” I blurted before I could stop myself. “They’re living, thinking beings. Not commodities. They’re not here for our amusement.”

Mary rolled her eyes over the rim of her mug and didn’t bother acknowledging me. Instead, she looked at Anchor, still sitting across from her at the little table. “As I said, Anchor, I have no business or quarrel with you and your camp. If you’d do me the courtesy of letting me and my monsters wait here for the rycke to come out, we’ll be unobtrusive and respectful. And then we will be out of your hair.”

There was a long, agonising silence, during which I grew tenser and angrier. I was sure Anchor would be able to feel the intensity of my stare piercing through the back of her head, but she didn’t move or speak for a long time.

“Why haven’t the military come to get him?” she eventually asked. “If they’re part of this with you. Surely they could swoop in and grab him easily.”

“Oh, I enjoy it,” Mary answered brightly. “Travelling, seeking out the most interesting species we can find. It’s fascinating. There are *so* many types of monsters, did you know that? And they’re all so unique. Some are quite beautiful.” She let out a delicate snort and gestured out the window. “Evidently, not the ones I keep with me when I’m on the road, but…”

When none of us reacted to her shitty joke, she continued. “I’ve heard the rycke is quite a sight. Unique. And with its wings, it would make quite the spectacle. From what I’ve heard about the creature, I’ll have no problem transporting it back to the gallery. They have a fire in them, apparently, but they’re quite agreeable, so we shouldn’t cause you any problems when we snag him. It won’t disrupt your little camp.”

I clenched my fists tightly, my gloves creaking with the curl of my fingers. *Quite agreeable*. That meant she’d heard Aury probably wouldn’t put up a fight, no doubt from those in the military who had kept him captive for years. She knew he wouldn’t hurt her or her pets if they tried to capture him, because it wasn’t in his nature to hurt anyone. She was going to use that against him to lock him up, just as the military had done.

“You’re not—” I began, my anger overriding any deference to Anchor, but then she interrupted me herself.

“I’m sorry, Mary, but I can’t in good conscience let you capture Au—the rycke.” She shook her head. “It’s inhumane. We don’t agree with keeping anything captive.”

I wilted a little, my breath leaving me in a shaky puff, but I was still trembling with agitation. From the corner of my eye, I saw Lilac sidle closer to me until I felt his long fingers give my back a subtle pat.

Mary sighed. “Well, I’m afraid there’s not much you can do for it when it decides to leave your camp, pet,” she said, her voice back to sickly sweet.

“No, there’s not,” Anchor agreed. “But we can warn him. And he doesn’t have to leave. He’s welcome in our camp. We’re not going to kick him out.”

Pure relief flooded through me, making my limbs weak. It wasn’t even tempered when Mary narrowed her eyes at Anchor. After a moment, her expression cleared again, and she picked up her tea.

“I can trade you for it,” she said casually, taking a sip. “Weapons. *Good* weapons. Food supplies to last you half a decade. Caches of medicine and survival equipment, so you wouldn’t have to go out scavenging for *years*.” She waved a hand toward the camp wall, which loomed over us out the window, casting long shadows. “I can get the power turned back on in there. Hot water. Heating. Technology to make your lives so much easier.”

I saw Anchor’s back stiffen, and my heart plummeted when I realised she was tempted. Of course she was. Aury had only been with us a week. Anchor had an entire camp to think of, on her own now that Cat was gone.

But Cat would never have traded a life for anything. I had to pray that Anchor remembered that, but even if she did, Cat wasn’t here. Cat couldn’t make this decision. She had to.

The silence was agonising as we waited for Anchor’s response. My breaths left me in tiny, trembling pants, and my limbs were so stiff it felt like they would snap.

“No,” Anchor finally said, her voice strangled and a hint of regret creeping through. “I won’t trade a living being’s freedom for supplies to make our lives easier. We’ve gotten by fine out here for nearly two decades. We don’t need bribes from you or the military.”

Relief didn’t come to me this time as we waited for Mary’s response. I was too on edge. Her painted mouth twitched, a split-second of anger

flashing through her watery blue eyes, like she wasn't used to anyone denying her. There probably weren't many people out here who cared about what happened to monsters.

I was unspeakably glad that it was Rig and me who had come across Aury in the military base. I didn't want to think about what might have happened to him if Mary had got there first. She'd already shown hints that she wasn't as sweet and airheaded as she was trying to come across, and now she dropped all pretences, eyeing Anchor with open hostility.

"That's a shame," she eventually said, voice tight. She reached out and grabbed her cigarette packet with jerky motions. "Well, I'm in no rush. Let's revisit this conversation in a week or so. See if you've changed your mind."

"And if I haven't?" Anchor asked.

Mary scowled before lighting a fresh cigarette. "I don't see why you wouldn't. The monster will leave your camp at some point. It won't want to stay living in this"—she gestured with disdain toward the camp wall—"apocalyptic fortress forever. You might as well benefit from it. Your *camp* might as well get a reward for giving shelter to a beast, hmm?" She reached over and patted Anchor's hand, which was still curled around her gun. "Think it over, and we'll chat again."

The conversation was clearly over. Anchor was stiff as she rose to her feet, gripping her gun tight. She started walking toward the door without looking back at us, so Lilac and I followed silently. I shot one last, wary glance back at Mary's little pet, but it was still curled up on the windowsill, possibly asleep.

When we got outside, Rig was already hurrying over to us. "You okay?" he asked, grasping my shoulder for a brief moment. "How did it go?"

I shook my head before tilting it toward the RV—and the silent aytorin beside it, watching us through his cage—and grabbed Rig's arm to lead him away. "She wants Aury," I told him the moment we were round the corner of the camp wall, out of earshot.

Rig stiffened. "So she does collect monsters?"

I nodded, eyeing Lilac and Anchor's backs as they walked silently in front of us. "Said she's got a gallery or a zoo or something further west."

Rig spluttered. "That's horrific."

I lowered my voice. "And she offered Anchor a trade for Aury." Just saying the words made my blood boil. "Food or weapons or other perks in

exchange.”

Rig went pale above his mask, wide brown eyes swinging to Anchor’s back. “Did she… What did she…?”

“She said no,” I told him, and he sagged in relief. “But Mary told her to think about it. She said she’s going to wait.”

Rig swallowed and glanced over his shoulder, even though we could no longer see the RV. “They’re… She’s staying?”

I nodded. “For a while at least. I think she thinks Anchor will cave.” I looked at our leader’s back again, at the tension in her narrow shoulders and the bow of her head.

I thought she might too.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Moth was leaning against the side of the motel building when we got back into camp, posture tense despite his arms being folded in a casual pose over his chest.

He straightened the moment he spotted us, eyes seeking me out, but I was busy trying to peer around at my yard to see if Aury was still out there. I couldn't spot him, and it wasn't like he was easy to miss with those gigantic wings.

"How did it go?" Moth asked.

Anchor exhaled. "Not great. Not terrible."

"Was I right?"

Anchor hesitated before nodding stiffly. "She offered us supplies in exchange for kicking Aury out of camp so she can capture him."

Moth's icy eyes skittered to me, his dark brows pinching for a moment. "Did you accept?"

"No," Anchor said, and I felt her gaze rest on me for a second. "It would be wrong. Aury's already been through enough. Nothing deserves to be kept in captivity."

I appreciated the words, but at the same time, I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if I hadn't been there when Mary offered Anchor her deal.

I could tell Moth was thinking the same thing, because he was watching me carefully. "Fair," he said, voice mild. "So you're definitely letting him stay here?"

Anchor exhaled. "Well, if we let him leave, she'll try and take him." She gave a helpless shrug. "We'll tell him, and I guess if he decides he wants to leave on his own anyway, there's not much we can do. But obviously in that scenario we'd get nothing."

I stared back at Moth for a second before looking away again, uncomfortable. He spoke a moment later. "I don't think he'll want to leave."

"Are you going to tell the camp?" Lilac asked Anchor in his flat voice. "About the deal she offered."

Anchor’s brow pinched as she reached up and rubbed her forehead. “God, I… It feels like I should, but—”

“Don’t,” Rig said. “You know what will happen if you do.”

He was right. Raiders were ruthless by nature. The Wastes made us that way. If the others knew what Mary had offered, they would vote to hand Aury over without a second thought. They would justify it as one life for many. Partly because it would be the life of someone they hadn’t lived with for years, but mainly because it would be the life of a monster, and the majority of humans didn’t regard monsters as people. Mary evidently didn’t.

“Okay,” Anchor said wearily. She rubbed the corners of her eyes. “Okay. I’ll let the camp know that Mary is here for Aury, and leave it at that.”

“I’m going to go find him,” I said, taking a step forward, but Moth quickly blocked me.

“I’m leaving,” he told me, looking down at me. “I wanted… Can I speak to you first?”

I pursed my lips behind my mask and nodded once, even though my body was straining with the need to find Aury and make sure he was alright. To convince my anxious brain that he was still here, inside the camp walls. Still safe.

The others walked off, Rig squeezing my shoulder before he left. Once they were gone, Moth looked back down at me with serious eyes. “Please be careful, Ghost. I know you… I know the rycke seems harmless, but—”

“Have you met him?” I asked, squaring my shoulders as I stared up at Moth.

He looked taken aback by the question, almost sheepish. “No, but everyone knows about the rycke, so I—”

“I know you’re trying to look out for us, Moth, but I *know* Aury.” I tried to soften my voice, because my feelings for Aury were making me defensive when deep down, I knew that Moth was only doing what he thought was right. “You don’t. I get what you’re saying—what you’ve heard about ryckes. But Aury isn’t dangerous. He doesn’t want to hurt anyone.”

Moth looked frustrated. “I’m sure he *says* that, Ghost, and he probably means it, but ryckes *are* dangerous. They just *are*.” He reached out and laid his hands on my shoulders. “They’re completely unpredictable. They’re chaos.”

I made a face at that, part of me wanting to laugh. Unpredictable? Aury was possibly more routine-based than I was. When we hid away together in my room while I was sick, he would lay beside me in the exact same position, every day, to read to me. He would make me have a drink of water every hour. He would carefully fold over the page to mark his spot when we finished reading for the day, always at the end of a chapter, never halfway through.

Aury was the *opposite* of chaos. He was like a… a calm, steady island in the middle of a tumultuous sea. He was soft and soothing. A balm.

I shook my head, and I was about to answer Moth when he made a soft sound and quickly let go of my shoulders. His wide eyes were focused beyond me, behind my right shoulder, and when I turned to follow his gaze, my heart leaped.

Aury was watching us from a short distance. It looked like he'd been coming back from the vegetable patch. His black eyes were uncertain, but that internal glow I'd noticed a few times now was slowly dimming within them, like it had flared a second before I turned around. He looked from me to Moth, then back to me.

"Fuck," Moth breathed behind me, his voice shaky, and Aury's eyes snapped back to him immediately. Two big, black pools that could have looked empty, but to me they were full of life.

I smiled behind my mask and started walking over to him, because a strange tension was growing in the space between us, and it was making me uneasy.

"Aury," I said when I reached him. After a moment of nervous hesitation, in which I second-guessed every single aspect of what I was about to do, I reached out and tangled my fingers with his. "I was about to come looking for you."

Aury's eyes slid from Moth to me, and his face softened into a sweet smile. He raised his free hand to follow the curve of my left brow and temple with his fingers in a brief touch. "Are you alright?"

I nodded. "I'm fine. But I need to tell you what Mary said." Unease roiled. "I was just saying goodbye to Moth, because he's leaving—" I turned to gesture at Moth behind me, but he had vanished.

"Um…" I turned back to Aury and looked up at him. I became momentarily distracted by the sight of him. He was so tall, so long and lean, but with those wide shoulders that made me want to climb him and cling

on. A pulse of desire throbbed deep in my belly, but I had to tell him everything first. “Shall we go to my room? Or yours,” I added quickly. “I don’t mind. Wherever you’re comfortable—”

“Yours is fine.” He smiled down at me. “I like your room.”

For some reason, that made me want to grin like a fool. “Okay.”

Aury kept his fingers threaded through mine as I turned to lead us to my room, and that just made me even more ridiculously happy, chasing away some of the worry still pounding through me at what I’d just heard in Mary’s RV. I wished I could feel his skin against mine, but I was still wearing my gloves.

My room was warm when we got inside, the sun high in the sky still. The window was open from when I’d been speaking to Aury through it earlier, and I could hear the hens clucking softly in the yard. I set my gun down on the table as I listened to the sound of the door clicking shut behind Aury.

When I turned to face him, he was already close, and I went still as he reached up to gently remove my mask.

Big eyes flickered up to meet mine. “Is this okay?” he asked quietly, and I nodded immediately, already breathless.

A small smile tilted his mouth as he set my mask down on the table, and then he was cupping my nape and leaning down to kiss me, uncaring that the skin around my mouth was damp from the heat inside my mask, or about the unattractive red line it left behind.

I shuddered out a breath against his lips, my body wanting to fall against him. Instead, I slipped my arms under his coat to wrap around his back, bringing our bodies closer together so I could feel him pressed against me. The barbs on Aury’s spine got smaller the further down they went and stopped around the mid-point of his back, so I was free to wrap my arms—or legs—around his hips and not worry. My cock twitched at the thought.

Aury made a soft sound as our mouths opened and our tongues met. He was so much taller than me that my throat was stretched, my head tilted right back as we kissed standing up, but I wouldn’t have stopped this for anything. I moaned a desperate sound as Aury’s tongue slid against mine, those twin points tickling. His hands moved to clasp my face sweetly between long, elegant fingers, thumb brushing over my chin, then up to trace the dampness of my lower lip even as we carried on kissing. The feel of it made me shudder, my cock stiffening rapidly in my pants.

Aury's hands dropped, and I felt him bend his knees as long fingers palmed my ass, before I was suddenly being lifted into the air. I grunted in surprise against Aury's mouth, but it turned into a moan when he set me down on the table and stood between my spread knees, hands slipping beneath my coat and shirt to roam over my back, his touch growing more frantic.

I shuddered and kissed him harder, reaching up to try and shove his coat off his shoulders. When I remembered his wings would get in the way, I groaned and reluctantly broke the kiss with the intention of helping him take it off.

But the momentary reprieve made me remember everything I still had to tell him. I groaned again, tipping my head forward to rest against his chest, trying to calm my breathing.

"What's wrong?" Aury sounded as breathless as I was. Long fingers cupped the sides of my neck. "Are you alright?"

I nodded and looked up into his alien eyes. "We just need to talk before we…"—I flushed—"get distracted."

Aury's face became solemn as he stared down at me. He nodded and took a step back, shrugging his coat back over his shoulders. I hopped down from the table, clearing my throat and valiantly ignoring the obvious bulges we were both sporting.

"What happened?" he asked me. "With… Mary."

"She…" I fidgeted uncomfortably. I didn't want to tell him, but I had to. "She's here for you."

Aury's eyes flared for a second, but otherwise his reaction was minimal. His face stayed calm. "Why?"

I couldn't stop my features twisting with disgust. "She collects monsters. To put on display for rich assholes paying to take a day trip into the Wastes. Like it's a goddamn amusement park."

A hint of fear crossed Aury's features. His head gave a tiny twitch. "She wants… to keep me locked up somewhere? On display?"

I crossed the short distance between us and took his hands. "It won't happen, Aury. We won't let her."

His breathing had grown a little shallower, and he blinked rapidly as he stared down into my eyes with furrowed brows. My throat ached when his head twitched again, harder than before. "Is she… Is she just going to wait out there? For me?"

“She’ll get bored soon,” I said immediately, squeezing his hands. “When she realises she can’t get you, she’ll leave.”

“What if she tries to hurt you?” Aury’s black eyes looked stark. Panicked. “What if she tries to get into the camp—”

“She can’t.” I shook my head. “Lilac would kill her without hesitation if she tried. And I think she knows that.”

I let go of his hands to quickly pull off my gloves, chucking them carelessly in the direction of the table behind me. Then I slipped my hands under his coat and shirt to feel the bare skin of his waist, tracing a prominent vein with my thumb. “We’ll keep you safe, Aury. She’s not going to get to you, and as soon as she realises that, she’ll leave. Trust me.”

He cupped my shoulders, fingers tense for a few moments before they softened. He nodded, and the tension bracketing his eyes lessened. “I trust you, Gage.”

The words seemed to spark another thought, and his gaze grew focused as he looked down at me. “Did your… friend say anything more about me? Moth.” Then he added, “He’s not human, is he?”

I shook my head. “Half monster.”

Aury nodded once. “That’s rare.” He gave me a faint smile. “Almost as rare as the rycke. It’s a lonely existence.”

I swallowed. “Well, he did actually tell us something about… that. About what you are.”

Aury went still again. “Oh?” he said, sounding unsure.

“He said that you… that you’re the only one. That there’s a…”—I gestured awkwardly at my own chest—“an egg or something inside you that will become the next rycke when you… when you’re gone.”

Aury relaxed a little. “Yes. There’s no true translation for it in your language, but it’s like… a life seed. It gives life to the rycke, and when I die, my body will nourish the seed to bring new life.”

I didn’t like thinking about that. “So there can never be any other ryckes? It’s just you? On your own?”

“There used to be many,” Aury said, voice sombre. “A very, very long time ago.”

I swallowed. “What happened? How come there’s only one now?”

Aury hesitated, as if he wasn’t sure he wanted to tell me. “Ryckes used to be very… combative. Violent. But only to each other,” he added quickly. “Ryckes have always been solitary, even when there were many, because

encounters between them could go very badly. They were defensive. Protective over their territory or property or mates."

"Well, lots of species are like that," I offered hesitantly. "Most creatures will protect their young or nests or…"

Aury nodded. "Yes. But you know that ryckes are… that I am very strong. That meant that fights between ryckes would get very dangerous."

I swallowed. "So they killed each other a lot?"

"It was fairly rare at first, because they travelled alone, or in pairs if they had a mate." Aury's throat bobbed. "But at some point, the ritualistic practice of eating the life seed of the rycke you had fought and killed became commonplace. Soon they realised that eating another's life seed made their own stronger. It gave them their memories. Their lineage's strengths."

"Shit." I stared at him in horror. "So they started… killing each other for their life seeds?"

Aury nodded, his eyes sad. "Soon, there was only one lineage left. One rycke."

I continued gaping at him. "You?"

Aury smiled a little and shook his head. "Not me. My ancestor. This was all a very long time ago, Gage. Hundreds of thousands of years."

"Then how do you know all of this? Is it written down somewhere?" I perked up at that. "Do you have books about your species' history?"

Aury shook his head. "Just their memories."

It was hard to imagine that there was an entire species' history stored inside Aury's brain. The memories of every single rycke that had ever lived fighting for space in there.

"Wow." I exhaled hard. My gaze drifted down to Aury's chest. "So the very last rycke life seed is in there."

Aury grinned like I'd told a joke. "Yes, it is."

"So is it… like a heart? A human heart, I mean."

He thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Not really."

"Do you *have* a heart?"

He shook his head again, then reached out to take my hand. "Here." Aury pressed my palm below his sternum, lower than where the heart sat in a human body.

I thought I detected a faint vibration. "Is it… Does it beat? Like a heart?"

Aury tilted his head. “Not really, but it does… I can detect it. It makes the life flow through me.”

“You mean your blood?”

He nodded, then gently clasped my face between his hands and drew me forward. After dropping a kiss on my forehead, he pressed my ear to his chest. “Listen.”

I went quiet so I could. Beneath my ear, I could feel the warmth of Aury’s skin through his shirt. There was no heartbeat, but after a few seconds I realised I could hear a thrumming sound. Almost like the rhythmic whoosh of water being pumped. I imagined the seed in there—the last rycke seed in existence—pushing the blood around his body, through all his dark, prominent veins, filling him with life. I pictured it looking like a nutmeg seed still in its red aril. I wondered if Aury even knew what it looked like. It wasn’t like he could check. Maybe he’d seen a memory of one of his ancestors tearing the life seed out of another rycke’s chest. I suppressed the shudder that the thought triggered.

“So this gives you all the memories of your ancestors?” I pulled back. “Of all the former ryckes in existence?”

“Not all. There are too many to fit in my head.” Aury shook his head. “But still many. It can sometimes be… overwhelming. Some of the memories are…” Aury shuddered and wrapped his arms around himself. “Unpleasant.”

It sounded like *most* of them would be unpleasant. I reached up and cupped his face, careful to avoid catching my fingertips on the barbs beneath his ears. “I’m sorry if it makes it worse to talk about it.”

Aury shook his head, hands settling on my waist. “It doesn’t, but…” His black eyes dipped to my mouth, and I swallowed in reaction. “Are we done talking now?”

I licked my lips, making Aury’s eyes flare, and nodded quickly. His mouth slowly split into a wide grin as he looked into my eyes again, leaning down to nuzzle my nose. “Can I kiss you again now, Gage?”

Another wordless nod. I was already breathing faster, and the heat in my body flared back to life when Aury’s lips touched mine, stoked so easily. I almost threw my arms around his neck to drag him closer, remembering his barbs at the last second. Instead, I gripped fistfuls of his coat and thrust my tongue into his mouth, moaning at his taste.

When he picked me up and carried me blindly toward the bed, still kissing me, I grinned against his mouth. That overwhelming happiness from earlier returned, filling me up, and I forgot about everything outside of this room.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

After we got Aury's coat unbuttoned and removed, it took only moments for us to tear off the rest of each other's clothes.

I was already panting with anticipation when he lowered me onto my back on the bed, following me down. I had just a second to see the deadly curve of the talons that topped his wings rising up over his shoulders before he kissed me again, moaning low into my mouth.

Suitably distracted, I sucked on his tongue as my fingers connected with his chest and dragged down, feeling every inch of him. When I reached his stiff cock, I groaned into his mouth at the thick wetness already coating the tip and sliding down his length.

"Fuck," I panted when our lips parted, peering down between our bodies to watch my hand spread that wetness further down his shaft. "There's just… so much. It's so hot."

Aury grinned at me, black eyes flaring. "Is it?"

I nodded desperately. "Yeah." I kissed him again, moaning as his forked tongue played with mine. "I love it," I panted against his mouth, stroking his slick cock, feeling the veins throb under my fingers. "I want you to…"

Aury shuddered, tongue flicking to brush my top lip. "What?" he asked, voice low with urgency.

I kissed him again, my hand pausing at the head of his cock so I could trail my fingertips through the pre-cum pulsing from the tip in steady bursts. Aury shuddered again.

"I want you to fill me up," I rasped, and Aury made a low sound as his head dipped and he began feverishly kissing down my chest.

I gasped when he licked one nipple before turning his head to bite gently on the other. Then he continued down, and my chest started to heave as my knees fell open wider. He grinned up at me as he slid lower, his wide shoulders filling the space they'd just made.

He continued to watch me as he lowered his head to drop a slow, open-mouthed kiss on the head of my dick, which was so hard it ached. He licked the pre-cum off his lips, and the sight of that black, forked tongue just made even more well from the slit as I groaned, brows pinching.

Rather than suck me into his mouth, Aury began trailing hot, wet kisses down the length of my cock, tongue licking softly with each one. My legs twitched, hips wanting to arch up to press my dick against his mouth, but I forced myself to stay still as Aury reached the base of my shaft.

A broken groan left me when his long tongue curled around my sac. “G-g-god,” I panted, one hand reaching down to thread through his soft hair while the other fisted the sheets next to my hip.

Aury didn’t linger long there, either. He sucked briefly on my sac as his hands slid along my inner thighs, making me shiver. My breath hitched when he pushed my knees up toward my chest, holding them there, tilting my hips. A second later, his tongue was on my hole.

The breath left me in a rush as I bit down hard on my lower lip to stop myself from making too much noise, conscious that it wasn’t late and the rest of the camp was out there, active and awake. Although, the realisation made everything even hotter—than I was in here with Aury while they were all out there going about their day like normal, and we were naked, and he was—

“G-g-god,” I whimpered, chest heaving when his forked tongue swirled softly, the sensation entirely unique and mind-numbingly good. “Aury.”

He moaned, the vibration making me shudder. Then black eyes glanced up through long dark lashes to watch me as he carefully pierced my ass with his tongue.

The sound that left me was almost inhuman before I managed to bite down on my lip to muffle it, hard enough to taste metal. My hand shot down to grab a fistful of Aury’s hair, and I felt his mouth curve into a sexy grin before he thrust his tongue deep again, almost making me shoot up off the bed.

My toes flexed, knees up by my shoulders and my hand still fisted in Aury’s hair to make sure he *kept doing that*. I was all bent up like a pretzel, and I should have been embarrassed, but I couldn’t bring myself to be because it felt too good. My leaking cock bucked against my belly, and my nuts were pulled up tight already. Aury slid his tongue up that sensitive stretch of skin to lave them with a low moan, and I jerked when I felt his fingertip circling my wet hole.

I nodded desperately when he looked up at me, a question in his eyes. Aury turned his head to kiss my inner thigh as he slid his finger inside. My breath shuddered out of me at the feel, familiar yet not, because it had been

a while since my ass had been involved in anything remotely fun, but I quickly grew addicted to his finger pumping inside me.

The discomfort was fleeting when he slid in another, because Aury slicked his tongue from the base to the tip of my cock at the same time, successfully distracting me. I looked down the length of my body again, panting out quick breaths, and saw his wings twitching like they wanted to stretch out. The barbs down his spine were flexing rhythmically with the bob of his head as he started sucking my cock. I moaned, a rush of stark pleasure tightening my balls, and a small part of my brain wondered if it made me a freak to be turned on by the sight of it. Most of me didn't care.

Aury's fingers left my body for a moment and I looked down again to protest, but the words died in my throat when I saw him sliding his fist over his own dripping cock, collecting lubrication. God, there was *so much*.

My heart was hammering when his fingers returned to my ass, and I hissed when he carefully slid three inside.

Aury stopped moving immediately, sliding his mouth free from my cock to look up at me with pinched brows. "Sorry," he whispered. "Shall I—"

"No," I blurted straight away, voice hoarse. "Keep going."

He watched me for a moment longer, then nodded and looked back down to kiss the head of my cock as he carefully worked to loosen me up. Once I relaxed, exhaling deep, trembling breaths, it didn't take long. Soon I was writhing on the bed, thighs trembling and hips jerking up as Aury brought me to the edge over and over, backing off before I could come every time.

By the time he crawled up my body to kiss me, his own breaths trembling with lust against my mouth, I was shaking with need. I went to throw my legs around Aury's back, pulling him closer, but without even breaking the kiss he grabbed my knees and stopped me. After stroking soothing palms down my thighs, he gently wrapped my legs around the swell of his ass instead, and I remembered the barbs down his spine. I could feel the leathery brush of his wings against my knees, as well as a slightly irritating tickle on my left shin, from strips of his damaged wing fluttering with his movements.

Instead of wrapping my arms around his neck, I cupped his face and looked up at him. This close, I could see the faint swirls of colour in his eyes so clearly. Mint green and pale purple and buttercup yellow—just tiny pinpricks like stars.

Aury smiled down at me, then dipped his head to give me a sweet kiss. “Ready?” he asked.

I hadn’t had this kind of sex in a *really* long time, and hardly ever, so I was a little nervous. It wasn’t like Aury was gargantuan, but he was tall, and his dick was… proportionate. It was going to be a tight fit at first, even though he’d prepped me.

I wasn’t going to let my nerves stop me, though. I grinned back, tracing the raised black lines on his left temple. The scarred skin of his burned cheek felt rough beneath my other hand. “So ready.”

Aury’s sweet smile turned into a slightly dirty grin as he reached down between our bodies to grasp his cock. My breath caught in my throat when I felt the hot, slick head slide against my hole. I exhaled and bore down, trying to mask my wince when he slipped inside a moment or two later.

Aury’s grin dropped as his lips parted with a tiny, pleasured gasp, brows pinching and eyes flashing. His cock throbbed, the head lodged inside me. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, body tense. Behind him, I could see his wings twitching madly.

I shook my head, leaning up to kiss him. “It’s already fading. Just give me a minute.”

He nodded and brushed his lips over my cheek, holding himself above me on tense arms. The black veins running down his toned bicep bulged when he transferred his weight to one hand and reached down to stroke my cock. I gasped and moaned, hips lifting with the shock of pleasure that distracted me from the faint, lingering ache in my ass.

By the time my cock was rock hard and dripping again, I was practically fucking myself on his straining dick. “Okay,” I panted, hands grabbing feverishly at his sides. “Okay, ready. Go. I’m ready.”

Aury let out a strained laugh and leaned down to kiss me as he let go of my cock to plant both hands on the mattress either side of my head. His hips pulled back, then sank deep again in an easy glide.

“Oh shit,” I got out, but then I couldn’t speak anymore as Aury made a low sound and crushed his mouth to mine as his hips snapped forward again. Then again. My cock pulsed wildly with pre-cum when I realised that I could actually feel those prominent veins winding up his shaft. The texture just made everything a million times more sensitive.

I tightened my grip on his sides, holding on for dear life as we started moving together faster and faster, the frantic energy pouring out of us. I was

only vaguely aware of my whimpering moans into his mouth and the insanely obvious, rhythmic creak of my rickety old bedframe beneath us.

My window was open, and I thought I could hear the low murmur of raiders talking as they made their way to the container entrance to take shifts keeping watch. I had a second to wonder if they could hear us, but then I decided I definitely didn't care because Aury's hips changed angle slightly, and his cockhead slid over my prostate.

"Oh my god," I gasped against Aury's panting mouth and gripped his sides too tight, fingertips digging into supple skin. I slid my hands under his arms to cup the backs of his shoulders and try and pull him closer, even though we were basically as close as it got. He smiled and kissed me once, then leaned back.

I started to glare up at him when he carefully slid free of my body, which made him laugh as he grabbed my hand and pulled me up into a sitting position. Between more hot kisses and touches, he turned me until I was kneeling on the mattress, gripping the headboard so tight in anticipation that my knuckles whited.

Aury made a low sound and kissed across my shoulders and the nape of my neck before reaching down. I felt the prod of his cockhead a second before he slid easily back inside, and we both groaned.

Aury slid his arms around my middle and plastered himself to my back as he started fucking me again, lips pressed against the bend of my neck.

"Oh god," I breathed, letting go of the headboard to lean back into his body fully, curling my fingers around the forearms crisscrossed over my stomach. I bit my lip and let out a strangled sound when Aury's right hand slid down my belly and circled my aching dick. I felt myself tighten up around his cock in response.

Aury let out a shaky breath and nuzzled my neck, sending cascades of shivers down my spine. "Gage." He slid his free hand up to cover the centre of my chest, holding me closer to him as his hips moved faster, pumping his cock in smooth slides, slicked by the unrelenting spill of pre-cum from his tip.

Oh god. My chest was heaving, fingers clutching restlessly at his arms as my head fell back against his shoulder. My cock was painfully stiff in his fist, and I knew I was moments away from coming.

I tried to warn him, but I could barely speak between my heaving breaths. "Au—Aury—"

“Yes,” he rasped against my neck, thrusts turning erratic and jerky as his own breathing sped up. “Gage—”

I cried out and seized up, the orgasm wrenching my nuts up hard and boiling up the length of my shaft. My hips jerked with the first spurt, which got caught on Aury’s pumping fist and slicked the way for the rest of them, making my eyes roll back in my head as I shuddered with pleasure.

Then Aury gasped; a low, hot sound against my neck. His body trembled against my back. His hand stilled as he grew distracted, but my dick was too sensitive now anyway, so it didn’t matter. I focused on the sensation of his cock kicking inside me as he started to come.

“*Gage*,” he gritted out, the fingers against my chest digging in, five hard pressure points. His hips jerked against my ass; twice, three times… four. Then five. Six. It kept going. I moaned in bliss when I remembered just how much Aury came and grinned deliriously to myself at the dirty thought.

When Aury’s orgasm ended, he was just as much a trembling mess as I was. He withdrew carefully, showering kisses over my nape and shoulders with almost frantic desperation.

I felt him shift and saw his veined arm reach past me to the nightstand, where he knew there were tissues after the night before. His fingers were trembling when he grabbed a handful, no doubt to clean me up, but I stopped him with a hand on his wrist.

“It’s okay,” I said, flushing because I didn’t want to actually voice out loud that I… wanted to feel it for a while first. Instead, I took the tissues and quickly cleaned up the mess I’d made against the headboard.

Aury kissed my shoulder. “Can we lie down? My legs don’t feel steady.”

I snorted with laughter at that. “Neither do mine. Good idea.”

We manoeuvred until we were under the covers on our sides, facing each other. I studiously ignored the wet patch under my hip. Aury’s wings hung limply off the side of the bed, the sheet draped over his waist so it didn’t get tangled up.

He cupped my chin and leaned forward to kiss me sweetly. “Are you alright?”

I huffed. “Uh, *yeah*, I’m good.”

Aury’s eyes gleamed with amusement as he moved his head back on the pillow. “Well, it seemed like you enjoyed yourself, but I wanted to make sure.”

“We’ll be doing it again in a little while, so yeah. Safe to say I enjoyed myself.” I watched him from across the pillow we shared, knowing my gaze was probably a little too adoring. “Can I ask you a really weird question?”

Aury grinned at me, his white teeth gleaming. He lunged forward to give me a playful kiss. “Yes.”

I smiled even as I blushed and cleared my throat. “If your species doesn’t need to have sex to procreate, then why… um, not that I’m not grateful—*super* grateful—but why do you have…” I gestured down toward Aury’s groin, my cheeks feeling hot. “The goods?”

After a moment of silence, Aury burst out laughing—and my chest got hot and tight at the sound of it. I couldn’t help but grin, even though I still felt like an idiot for asking it.

He kissed me again, fingers curling through my hair behind my ear as he gazed at me with affection. “You’re asking me why I have a cock?”

“And balls,” I blurted, my face getting hotter. “And semen. All of it, I guess, if you’ve never biologically needed it. Again, not complaining.”

Aury laughed again. “Well, as long as you’re not complaining.” He shifted his fingers in my hair, briefly stroking my earlobe with his thumb. “It’s actually for a fairly dark reason, but…” He shrugged. “Most things to do with ryckes are dark, I suppose.”

“Oh.” I fidgeted nervously. “Well, you don’t have to—”

“It’s fine.” Aury smiled at me. “It’s not my past, but my ancestors’. The seed gives me some of their memories, remember?”

I nodded. “I remember.”

“Initially, when there were more of my kind, sex was the ritual that brought mates together—that bonded two ryckes enough for them to be able to stay together without harming one another, when their natural instinct was to fight,” he told me. “When the ryckes started fighting for each other’s life seeds, sex and seduction turned into tactics they used to steal them. A rycke would seduce another, and while they were distracted, they would tear open the other rycke’s chest to get to their life seed and swallow it.”

I gaped at him. Aury just shrugged one shoulder, as if he was aware of how dark it all sounded.

“So, you…” I couldn’t help but reach a hand under beneath the covers and cover the centre of my chest. “Do you have an instinct to tear open my chest when we’re having sex?”

Aury laughed, and I jumped a little when he lunged forward and gently pushed me onto my back, my heart giving a mighty thud. He dropped his head to nudge my hand aside and kiss the centre of my chest. “Of course not.” He grinned up at me. “I know there’s no life seed in here. Just your human heart.”

He pressed his ear to the centre of my chest, listening to my heartbeat, the scars on his cheek rough against my skin. I relaxed into the bed, reaching up to thread my fingers through his hair, mindful of the barbs on his neck. After a few moments, Aury sighed. “I like this sound.”

I peered down at the top of his dark head. “What, my heartbeat?”

He nodded, and I winced when I felt the barb beneath his ear almost catch my skin. It didn’t, and he hadn’t done it on purpose, so I didn’t say anything.

Then he lifted his head to nuzzle my sternum, dropping another kiss there, and I forgot all about the dangerous parts of him anyway.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“She’s not going to leave, is she?” Lilac said to me as we sat on the camp wall, our legs hanging over the side.

I stared down at Mary’s RV. Faint strains of crackly music drifted through the vehicle’s open window, where I could see Mary smoking a cigarette and sipping something cold from a tall glass, enjoying the sunset. She looked like she was on vacation, not living in an old, worn RV being pulled by two huge, fleshy monsters, accompanied by a bodyguard that carried a war hammer and had a cage encasing his head.

It had been two weeks, and she hadn’t budged. She also hadn’t attempted to engage us. It was like she had decided to just wait us out—wait for us to shunt Aury out of our camp and into the Wastes, where she would be ready to pluck him up and take him away.

Or maybe she was waiting for Anchor to take her up on her previous offer. We’d had another vote a few days earlier about whether to let Aury stay, which had filled me with rage, but I was just one of many here and I couldn’t put a stop to it despite how cold and inhuman it felt. At least Anchor hadn’t mentioned the trade Mary had offered.

The camp had voted to let Aury stay, but it had been terrifyingly close. I didn’t think I was a particularly vindictive person, but I made a point of memorising every raider who voted to kick Aury out, knowing that Mary was waiting out there to snare him, like a spider in a web.

Lilac had voted to let Aury stay. I knew he came across as cold and unfeeling, but I was pretty sure he cared about Aury in his own way. At the very least, he was indifferent.

“Not without Aury,” I croaked in reply to Lilac’s question. Just saying the words out loud made me go cold.

“She’ll be waiting a long time, then.” Lilac’s voice was as flat and emotionless as ever, but his words made me feel better.

Most of the camp didn’t seem to care, or at least hadn’t commented on the fact that Aury stayed in my room every night. It was pretty obvious that there was something between us, even though it wasn’t like we socialised with other raiders. I’d never really done that, anyway.

There were a few who gave me revolted looks now. And Cutter was always eager to voice his disgust for me and Aury in general, not necessarily about the fact that we were… romantically involved. I could tell Anchor didn't know what to make of it and was worried about my emotional investment in Aury. I knew it was partly for my own sake, and partly for the potential upset it could bring to the camp.

I was addicted to him. I hadn't before realised how starved my body had been for intimate touch. For sex. But it was more than that, too. I felt like I'd woken up after a long sleep. Like I had something driving me each day, rather than going through the motions. He made mundane things feel new and joyful again, like reading or gardening or tending to the hens. Aury was eager to experience it all, no doubt due to spending over a decade trapped in a tiny cell deep underground.

Every night, when I went to sleep with him curled around me, my chest felt so full that it might burst. Like there was so much emotion filling me up that I didn't have a big enough outlet for it all, despite the fact that we had sex in some form almost every night. We were frantic for each other.

The brush of Lilac's arm against my sleeve knocked me back out of my head. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small figurine and his whittling knife. I glanced down as he did it, and my hand snapped out to grab his wrist before I could stop myself. Lilac went stiff at the touch.

"Is that… *nail polish*?" I asked in an incredulous voice, staring hungrily at the bright pink tips of his long, bony fingers. I was unspeakably jealous. "Where did you get still-good nail polish from?" I demanded.

There were bottles and bottles of the stuff in old stores—wasn't like it was something people wanted to scavenge—but they were all twenty years old, so the polish inside was either thick, gloopy sludge or a stiff block of colour. I always gazed at them longingly when I was out scavenging, because the thought of being able to change a little detail about myself like that was so appealing, even if they would be hidden beneath my gloves. For the most part, the Wastes were bleak and boring. It was probably stupid to want so badly to be able to have a tiny splash of colour—something so frivolous—but I couldn't help it. Evidently, neither could stoic, unfeeling Lilac.

He yanked his hand back. "Stole it from Mary," he said, tone defensive.

I gaped at him. "You what? When did you do that?"

"When we went to speak to her with Anchor. When she first got here."

I continued staring at him with envy. “What the fuck! I barely saw you *move* in there. How many did you steal?”

Lilac shrugged as he began lazily whittling. “A few.”

“Well, share them!”

“No, they’re mine.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Let me borrow them, at least. Please?”

He narrowed his bright-green eyes back at me over his plain black mask. “Will you look after them?”

“Yes!” I blurted, stomach twisting with excitement. I wondered if Aury would want me to paint over his naturally greyish-green nails. Rig would want his painted, no question. “What colours did you steal?”

“This.” Lilac raised his hand to wiggle his fingers, showcasing the bright pink. “Red and purple.”

“Can I borrow the pink?” I asked immediately. “And the red? Rig will want red.”

Lilac rolled his eyes. “You can’t just use them all up painting everyone’s nails in here.”

“Not everyone,” I protested, “just me and Rig. And maybe Aury.”

Lilac grunted. “Fine. Come and get them later.”

I couldn’t help but grin behind my mask, leaning over to bump his shoulder with my own. “Thanks, Lilac.”

He just grunted again, back to whittling. We sat in silence for a while—not quite companionable, because Lilac wouldn’t have admitted to being friends with anyone, but something close. I was scanning the still, lifeless horizon when movement beneath us, close to the camp wall, caught my eye.

I quickly leaned forward and looked down, then stilled in shock. “What the hell does Rig think he’s doing?” I croaked, watching my best friend furtively hug the camp wall, making his way toward the RV. I could see the aytorin already watching him, as unmoving as ever.

I went to scramble to my feet when Lilac’s hand shot out and gripped my arm. “Leave it.”

“Huh?” I stared at him, brows pinched, before darting another anxious glance down at Rig as he started walking toward the aytorin, backpack slung over one shoulder.

“He did the same thing the other night when I was on watch. Told me beforehand he was going to,” Lilac said, sounding entirely too unemotional to be delivering this terrifying news to me.

"*What*?" I spluttered. "You knew, and you've been letting him do this?"

Lilac gave a tiny shrug, still whittling. "He can do what he wants. He said he'd only do it when I'm on watch so I can keep an eye on him. But the beastie doesn't seem interested in hurting him."

"What the hell?" I stared down at Rig, who was standing beside the aytorin now. Rig was a decent height, but next to the beastie he looked small from all the way up here. Vulnerable. Worry clenched my insides as I watched, terrified the aytorin was going to swing that huge war hammer and kill Rig right in front of me.

He didn't. He just stood there, focused on Rig, who was speaking rapidly to him, gesturing at his backpack. Then the aytorin's caged head bobbed once in a slight nod, and the pair of them walked around the RV until they were out of sight, the chain keeping the beastie attached to the vehicle stretched almost to its limit.

"Shit," I stammered, trying to get to my feet again.

Once more, Lilac stopped me and I gritted my teeth, wanting to tear his hand off my arm. "Ghost, calm down. Rig's an adult. He can go speak to the beastie if he wants."

"What if Mary sees him?" I blurted, mind racing with how badly this could go wrong. God, Rig was a naïve idiot sometimes. "She wants Aury. She could hold Rig hostage in exchange for him and threaten to kill him if we don't—"

"I doubt that will happen." Lilac sounded sceptical—maybe even a touch amused at my catastrophising. "He's being careful, anyway. She doesn't know he's there—look."

I begrudgingly admitted Lilac was right. Mary was still lounging by the window on the opposite side of the RV, a tattered paperback in one hand and cigarette in the other. The music was still playing, drifting up to us on the top of the wall, but too faint for me to try and work out what it was.

"I'll keep an eye on them," Lilac told me. "I promise."

"Lilac, you are far too fucking relaxed about this," I gritted out, twisting in place to glare over at the raider who was *supposed* to be keeping watch over the camp entrance. "How did he get all the way to the RV without anyone else spotting him? Who is that keeping watch over there?"

I peered closer, trying to make it out, when Lilac told me, "Cutter," in his flat voice.

My jaw clenched so hard I thought my teeth would crack. Of course it was, because he was a lazy, good-for-nothing asshole.

"Does Anchor know about this?" I asked Lilac as I turned back round to stare down anxiously at the RV. I watched that chain, looking for any kind of movement that might suggest… what? That the beastie was smashing Rig's brains in with his war hammer? I didn't even know what I was looking for, but I was tense and breathless with worry for Rig. Stupid, naïve, trusting Rig.

"No." I sensed Lilac side-eye me. "Are you going to tell her?"

I gritted my teeth, warring with myself. In the end, loyalty to Rig made me say, "I'll speak to him first. To try and work out what the hell he thinks he's doing."

Lilac gave a tiny shrug. "Maybe he's just trying to be nice. Befriending a beastie who is clearly being held against his will. Just like you have with Aury."

"That's—" I stopped myself. Because was it really that different?

Yes. Yes it was. "Aury wasn't in the company of a literal villain who roams the Wastes, snatching up monsters to keep on display in her… fucked up dystopian menagerie."

"Does he look like he's *willingly* in her company?" Lilac asked, gesturing down at the RV despite the fact we couldn't currently see the aytorin. "Don't be a hypocrite, Ghost. Relax. Rig's a big boy. You can't protect him from everything."

I went pink behind my mask. "Are you saying I baby him?"

"I'm saying you worry. About everything. All the time."

I spluttered. "I think I'm warranted in worrying about Rig *sneaking out of camp* to speak to a huge, scary beastie with a cage on his head and a *war hammer!*"

"It's Rig's choice," Lilac said calmly. "He knows the risks."

I groaned in frustration. "That doesn't mean I'm just going to sit by and __"

"Ghost!"

Anchor's voice made me jump as she yelled up from behind us, down in the camp. I cast a final worried look at the RV and that chain before getting to my feet and walking to the inner edge of the container, peering down into the camp below.

“Need to speak to you,” Anchor called, far below me, hands cupped around her masked mouth. “Diner in two minutes.”

I gave her a thumbs up to let her know I’d heard, then turned around to stare hard at the back of Lilac’s head. “Keep an eye on Rig,” I told him. As I walked past his bent head, I swiped at the back of his high ponytail, making Lilac hiss with irritation. “Stop whittling and *watch them*.”

“I am,” he shot back, annoyance creeping into his usually blank voice.

I made my way down the hatch and into the container network, already anxious about why Anchor wanted to talk to me. Was she going to kick Aury out? Had she finally decided to take Mary up on her offer?

It was already gloomy within the camp when I emerged out of the shipping containers, the sun too low in the sky to reach us over the wall. Overhead, the sky was a bruised purple with a splash of red, and the air was cooling rapidly. A few raiders were coming back from the vegetable patch as I made my way over to the diner, and the slightly accusatory way they eyed me told me that Aury had been there—probably still was.

Anchor was fidgety when I entered the diner, straightening up from the counter as soon as I stepped inside. “What’s she doing?” she asked, taking a step toward me.

I shrugged. “Nothing. Just sitting there like she’s on vacation.”

Anchor grunted, lifting a hand to scrub it over her forehead. “She’s fucking with us.”

“No,” I said. “She wants Aury. She’s waiting us out, but will she forever? Anchor, we need to do something before she does. What if she tries to get in and grab him?” I asked worriedly.

“I know, I know.” Anchor rubbed her eyes, then dropped her hand with a hard sigh. “But that’s not what I want to speak to you about.”

When she gave me a tentative, beseeching look, my heart plummeted.

“Before Moth left, he asked if we’d been to the Topeka camp recently to ask them if they’ve heard anything about Cat,” Anchor began, and my heart dropped even further.

The Topeka raider camp wasn’t actually near Topeka in Kansas—that was just the closest former major city. It was further north-west, and was several days’ walk from here. It was apparently almost as old as our camp, and Cat and Anchor were friendly with its leader, Wick. I’d been there a few times in the past to trade with them on behalf of the camp.

“Didn’t Moth ask them himself when he was there?” I said quickly, to try and deter what I knew Anchor was going to ask me.

She shook her head. “He hasn’t been there for a while. We were just talking about our search for Cat, and he asked if we’d been there to see if they knew anything. And we haven’t, so…” She trailed off, giving me a placating look.

Every inch of me was already tense. I didn’t give her any slack. If she was going to make me do this, she was going to damn well ask. “So…?”

Anchor sighed. “I’m sorry, Ghost, but we’ve exhausted all other avenues. If you could just go there to ask—”

“I’m not leaving Aury unprotected while Mary’s still camped outside.” I was shocked at myself for denying Anchor, but I fisted my hands in my gloves and stood my ground.

“He won’t be unprotected. He’ll still be safely inside the camp. Lilac will still be here to watch him. So will I. So will Rig.”

So I was the only one who didn’t get to be. I could feel myself getting hot with the rising need to yell at her. To tell her to send someone else out there for once—a raider who didn’t have someone waiting for them back at the camp. Who didn’t have someone they truly cared about.

It must have showed on my face, because Anchor sighed and gave me an unhappy look. “I didn’t want to ask, Ghost. I’ve been waiting because I was hoping Mary would get tired and leave. But she isn’t. And we can’t just put our lives on hold forever because she’s sitting out there. As long as you’re careful slipping out of the camp—”

“They won’t know anything, Anchor,” I interrupted, my voice trembling with barely controlled frustration. “It’ll be pointless. Cat won’t be there. They won’t be able to tell me anything.”

Anchor’s face hardened. “They might. We have to try. We can’t just give up when Cat’s out there, needing us to help him. If he could get back on his own, he would have. So that means he needs us to keep looking.”

Or he’s dead. The words hovered on the tip of my tongue, but I could see in Anchor’s glare that she wouldn’t acknowledge them if I said them.

We stood at an impasse for a few tense moments, staring at each other. The squeak of the diner door opening made me look toward it, in time to see Rig stepping inside, slightly breathless and pink behind his mask, like he’d just jogged his way here.

“Hey,” he said, glancing between us. “What’s going on?”

I gritted my teeth and pointed at him. “I need to speak to *you* in a minute.”

Rig’s wide brown eyes told me he knew exactly what I wanted to talk to him about, but he just nodded wordlessly, Adam’s apple bobbing beneath the edge of his leather mask as he swallowed.

“I just… I asked Ghost if he’d be willing to go to the Topeka camp to see if they’ve heard anything about Cat,” Anchor said, sounding a little less hard-headed now that my pit bull had shown up to defend me. Despite my anger at Rig sneaking out to speak to the beastie, I wanted to reach over and cling to his arm.

Rig frowned at Anchor, brows pinching. “Is it, like, an *essential* trip, though?”

Anchor’s forehead went ruddy as her hands balled up into fists. “Am I the only one who still gives a fuck about Cat?” she exploded, dark eyes getting glossy. “Yes Rig, it’s essential to *me* because Cat is still out there somewhere. We need to find him.”

“I get that, and of course we still care about Cat. Of course we want to find him.” Rig’s voice was calm. “Does it have to be Ghost?”

Anchor stared between us, eyes slightly wild. She looked like she had just about reached her breaking point. “It’s *always* Ghost,” she burst out. “It’s always been Ghost. He’s our scout. That’s his *job*.”

She swung her dark eyes toward me, giving me an accusatory glare. “You don’t want to do your job anymore? You want to stay here with your beastie instead? Your loyalties have changed pretty quick, Ghost.”

“Hey, what the *hell*, Anchor,” Rig exclaimed, gripping my forearm, even as my stomach twisted with anxiety at her words. Shit, she was going to kick me out of camp, and the nerves were making me tongue-tied, and I couldn’t even tell her she was wrong—

“God, I’m sorry.” Anchor was shaking her head and covering her eyes with both hands, all that righteous anger gone as quickly as it had flared up. Her voice shook. “I’m sorry, Ghost. I didn’t mean it.”

I was panting with anxiety, breaths leaving me in shallow little bursts as we watched Anchor in silence. I couldn’t stand seeing her like this. She was truly at her limit—had been for a while, but Mary’s arrival had pushed her past it. And as the sole camp leader, she had to try and stay calm and in control all the time. She had to make the difficult decisions, and it was

clearly eating away at her. She was one of the strongest people I knew, but even the strongest people could collapse under enough pressure.

My resolve weakened, then crumbled. “It’s okay,” I mumbled. “I’ll go.”

Rig shook his head, squeezing my arm. “Someone else can—”

“It’ll be quickest if I do it,” I interrupted him, voice flat. “I know the way. I’ve been before. They know me.”

I saw Anchor sag with relief, even as she said, “Are you sure?”

Rig was watching me, brows drawn, but he waited for me to speak. I nodded once. “I’m sure.” Then I stared at her hard. “As long as you promise to protect Aury. Get Lilac to keep an eye on him.”

She nodded quickly. “I promise.”

I turned to leave. “I’ll head out tomorrow,” I said as I walked to the door, Rig quickly following. God, I was such a pushover.

“Thank you, Ghost,” Anchor called after me, but I didn’t stop as I shoved my way out of the diner and strode across the camp, Rig still hot on my heels.

When we reached our doors, I grabbed Rig’s sleeve and dragged him into my room with me. Now that I knew I’d be leaving camp, the worry about him sneaking out to see the aytorin had tripled. I wouldn’t be here to watch him, and if Lilac was watching Aury, Rig could easily get hurt.

Before I could say any of that though, Rig spoke up. “You could have refused,” he said as he shut the door behind him, voice tentative.

I snorted without humour as I pulled off my mask. “Who else is going to do it?”

Rig looked over at me, his own mask now in his hand. He cleared his throat and looked down at it, running his fingers over the studs punched into the leather. “Do you really hate it?”

I stilled. “Hate what?”

“Going out into the Wastes.”

I stared at Rig in disbelief. “Are you kidding? Of course I do!”

Rig flushed, looking shamefaced. “Sorry, dumb question. I just… I thought maybe before Aury you… liked the chance to get out of camp. I mean, you volunteered to start going out scouting almost as soon as we got here.”

I shook my head. “Yeah, because I didn’t want to be dead weight!” I took a breath. I wasn’t angry at Rig, and my tone was too sharp. “You were

useful, Rig," I tried to explain. "You could make stuff. Fix stuff. All I had going for me was… being fast and unnoticeable."

Rig frowned and stepped closer to me, discarding his mask on the table on his way. "That's not true, Ghost."

"Yeah. It is." My voice was flat. "But it's fine. It's not…" I rubbed my face. "I can go. Whatever. It's fine."

"You could ask Lilac to go," Rig offered, gazing at me with big brown eyes like a kicked puppy. I felt bad that I'd vented my frustration on him. It wasn't his fault he was useful and good at fixing stuff.

"Lilac's needed here. To protect the camp."

Rig made a frustrated sound. "I don't want you to go. Not if you hate it that much." His face flushed again. "I'm sorry, Ghost. I was being a dumbass, convincing myself that you actually *wanted* to be out there, because it made me feel better for staying here all the time, I guess."

He looked so miserable that I forced a crooked smile onto my face and clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't be silly. Not your fault, dork." Then I remembered I was mad at him. "But you could do me a favour while I'm gone and not be a fucking idiot."

"Huh?" Rig's brown eyes were wide and innocent. Too innocent.

"What the hell are you doing, Rig?" I gave his shoulder a weak shove. "Sneaking out there to talk to that beastie?"

He went red. "I just—He needs help. He doesn't want to be stuck with Mary. You can see that for yourself."

"He could be dangerous!"

"Aury could have been, too," he shot back immediately.

"But Aury clearly wasn't, Rig. He was chained up and injured." I gestured in the vague direction of Mary's RV outside the camp wall. "That dude is huge and has a *gigantic war hammer*."

Rig cleared his throat. "We don't know that for certain."

I stared at him. "What? What the hell are you—" It dawned on me, and I made an impatient sound. "Be serious, Rig."

"Okay, look." Rig held up his hands in placation. "I just want to try and help him. And those other two beasties chained up." He made a face. "Maybe not the little one. It freaks me out and she seems to have domesticated it, anyway. But if I can get the aytorin and two borolesh free —"

“How are you planning on freeing them?” I blurted. “They’re chained up! If they could break those chains, they would have. What makes you think *you* can?”

“I have a rotary blade,” Rig shot back like a petulant child.

“You don’t think Mary’s going to notice you cutting through the chains attached to her RV? You don’t think she *might* have something to say if she looks out the window and sees you liberating her monster slaves? She has a gun in there, Rig,” I said, voice cracking with worry. “I saw it. What if she spots you out there and just shoots you?”

Rig went red again, this time with indignant anger. “Well, I’m going to do *something*,” he snapped. “I don’t know how the hell she captured them in the first place, but if I can just get them free, surely she won’t be able to again. Maybe the aytorin can shelter here until she leaves—”

“Jesus Christ, Rig.” I scrubbed at my face.

“Look, I didn’t ask for your input, alright?” he said, tone uncharacteristically sharp. “So just stay out of it. I’m doing it on my own. I don’t need your help.”

His words stung, and I could tell from his face when I looked at him that he regretted them. “I’m sorry,” he croaked.

“I’m just worried you’ll get hurt,” I told him.

Rig’s face softened. He stepped closer to rest his hands on my shoulders. “I know, and I love you, but… you worry about *everything*, Ghost,” he added, voice hesitant. “Sometimes that much worry is crippling. I’ll be careful. I’m not stupid. I know what I’m doing.”

I shook my head, vision blurring a little as I looked away. “I know you’re not stupid.”

Rig closed the final distance between us and yanked me into a hug, squeezing his arms around me. “Just trust me, okay?”

I nodded against his shoulder, body drooping.

“And you be careful too, yeah?” he added, squeezing me tighter before we parted. “Out there. What’s the Topeka camp like?”

I exhaled, stomach clenching at the thought of the long journey there on foot. “Um… they’re fine. Much bigger camp than ours. They’re in an old high school, and it’s huge.”

“What’s the leader like?”

“Wick?” I shrugged, thinking back. It had been a year or so since I’d last gone there. “Seems fair. Well-liked. He and his wife Vesta seem to run

things pretty well, especially considering there's so many of them."

"How many?"

I shrugged again. "Maybe… fifty?"

Rig whistled. "Damn. I don't think I could handle living with that many people." He chuckled.

Despite the tension coursing through me, I managed to lift one corner of my mouth in a smile, my face feeling like it might crack from the effort. "Same."

Rig snorted and gently punched my shoulder. "You can barely handle living with less than half of that amount."

He was right. Truthfully, I knew I'd be fine if the only people I ever saw again for the rest of my life were Aury, Rig and maybe Lilac. Anchor would have been on that list before she started sending herself to an early grave from stress. Cat would have been too, but he was gone.

I sighed. "I'm going to go find Aury and tell him I have to leave tomorrow."

Rig made a face. "He won't like that."

"I know," I said as we headed for the door, wondering if I should be ashamed of the selfish warmth that bloomed in my chest at the thought of Aury actually caring that I'd be out there and not with him. I knew Rig cared and worried about me too, but with Aury, it was different.

With Aury, everything was different.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Aury hated the news.

He made a distressed sound when I told him and shook his head almost frantically. “Please don’t go,” he’d said, big black eyes mournful. “I’ll worry.”

That look never failed in turning me to a puddle of mush, so I’d kissed him and told him I’d be careful, and as quick as possible, and I’d take Rig’s pipe gun with me.

Aury had still been tense. He’d taken me to bed and fucked the hell out of me—twice—before curling around me like he could somehow keep me from going out into the Wastes.

When I woke up the next morning, he was still caging me in with his body, nose pressed against my temple as he breathed in my scent. And even though he was worried about me being in the Wastes alone, the thought of him being here without me while Mary was still outside, still waiting to pounce, filled me with intense dread.

So I got up and dressed quickly, determined to do something about it before I left. Aury sat up in bed, watching me with worried eyes. “Are you leaving right now?” he asked. “For the other camp?”

I shook my head, wiggling my fingers into my left glove. “I’m going to get Anchor and we’re going to try and get Mary to leave. We can’t stay in this stalemate forever.”

Aury was quiet for a long moment, watching me as I pulled on my other glove. “If she won’t leave, I—”

“You’re not going out there,” I said, my tone sharp. I picked up my mask, but before putting it on I walked over to the bed and leaned down to kiss Aury. “Will you sort the girls out for me?”

Aury kissed me back, hands shooting up to cup my face. He nodded when our lips broke apart. “You mean now or while you’re gone?”

“Both.” I kissed him again, but his eyes were still worried when I straightened up.

“If you’re going out there to talk to her, please be careful,” Aury said, fingers twisting the sheets. “Why don’t I come with you and talk to her myself—”

“No way, definitely not.” I shook my head and pulled on my mask, adjusting it until it was comfortable. “Too risky. I’ll be fine. We’ll take Lilac.”

I smiled at him behind my mask as I slung my useless gun over my shoulder and tucked my crowbar into my belt. “I won’t be long. I’ll be back to get ready in a little while.”

Aury watched me from the bed as I left the room. It had rained overnight, so the air was cool and damp, and my boots got wet as I walked across the grass toward the diner. When I stepped inside, Anchor and Rig were both in there already.

“Ghost.” Rig straightened up from where he’d been leaning on the counter, laughing with Daisy. “I was just getting some breakfast to bring to you. Wanted to make sure you ate well before you left.”

Daisy tutted. “He eats well even when he has to go out there. We make sure of it.” She shot me a smile from behind her mask, dark eyes crinkling at the corners. “When you’re back, I’ll make your favourite to welcome you home.”

I smiled. “Thanks, Daisy.”

“So are you all set?” Anchor asked me. “You remember the way, right?”

I tensed. “Yes,” I said. “But I want us to go and speak to Mary first. Before I go.”

“What?” Rig looked over, forehead creased. “Why?”

“We can’t just keep hoping she’ll get bored and leave,” I said. “She’s clearly not going to do that. She wants Aury. If we want her to go, we need to try and make her.”

“And how are you proposing we do that?” Anchor sounded sceptical.

I shrugged, feeling somewhat useless. “I mean… I’m not good at this kind of stuff but… we need to try something, surely. If we tell her that Aury isn’t leaving, no matter how long she sits there, then maybe…”

I trailed off, feeling stupid. Anchor and Rig were both watching me closely, but Daisy had gone back into the kitchen and was busying herself at the hatch.

Rig shot me a smile behind his mask. “It’s definitely worth a shot. You’re right. Our method of waiting her out obviously hasn’t worked.” He glanced at Anchor. “I’ll come with you.”

Anchor let out a hard breath and nodded. “Okay. Let’s try it.”

Lilac was sitting beside the archway that led to the entrance, whittling, and he got to his feet as we approached. “Are we paying Mary a visit?”

Anchor nodded, and he followed without a word. Everything was still and quiet when we emerged into the Wastes, a faint breeze making the trees behind the camp rustle pleasantly. The aytorin had moved the RV further toward them last week, to give the borolesh more leaves to eat. He seemed to care for them, in some way. Or maybe he was just concerned that if they starved to death, he’d be left pulling Mary’s motorhome.

He was in his usual spot, standing beside the vehicle when we rounded the wall and the RV came into sight. While it was rare to see him moving, he seemed to still even more as he spotted us. Long grey fingers loosely wrapped around the handle of his war hammer, which was resting on the ground.

As we approached, I saw Mary’s pale face peering out from a window. It vanished, and a few moments later the door squealed as it opened, and she descended the little steps.

“Good morning.” Her voice was cheerful, and the gleam in her eyes told me she was expecting a very different outcome to what this conversation would actually have. I could tell she thought Anchor had finally caved. That we were going to hand Aury over.

Anchor cleared her throat as we came to a stop, careful to remain out of reach of the aytorin’s chain. “Morning, Mary.”

There was an awkward silence before Anchor cleared her throat again. “Look, this has gone on long enough. We’re not going to—”

“Oh my goodness,” Mary suddenly gasped, hands fluttering up to cover her mouth. Her eyes were wide as she looked at something behind us. “Is that it?”

I spun round, feeling a stab of fear when I saw Aury walking toward us. My heart started hammering in my chest. Aury was outside of the camp wall. Vulnerable. It wasn’t safe. No—

“I’m alright,” he told me as he reached us, only for my ears, giving me a soft smile. Then he looked over at Mary with calm, steady eyes. I was sweating, eyes darting over to the aytorin, who still hadn’t moved, but I could tell that his gaze was fixed on Aury beneath that cage. At least Aury was out of his reach—his chain wouldn’t let him get to us.

“It’s damaged!” Mary exclaimed in obvious dismay, thin dark brows furrowing. “Look at its wing!”

"*He*," I corrected through gritted teeth.

She ignored me. "And that ugly scarring on its face!" She tutted. "What a shame."

"Stop talking about him like he's not here," I burst out, face red with indignant anger on Aury's behalf. Especially when he stayed silent beside me.

Mary ignored me yet again, giving Aury an appraising look. "It's a little more… milquetoast than I was led to believe."

Her voice was disdainful, and I wanted to smack her when her painted lips pursed in an unhappy little moue. "Darling, what's your prey of choice?" she asked Aury. "What will bring a bit of life to you? Because this," she waved a hand in Aury's general direction, "is not what I came for."

"Then leave," I couldn't help but hiss through clenched teeth.

Mary's watery blue eyes finally turned to look at me. I sensed the heavy gaze of the aytorin on me as well, beneath that cage.

"I'm not leaving empty-handed, pet." Mary's cigarette-raspy voice was sugary sweet. "I came for the rycke, and I'm leaving with it."

"I'm not going with you." Aury's voice was quiet, but it still made everyone fall silent.

Mary paused, then laughed. "I'm sorry, pet, but you won't have a choice."

"Yes, he will." Lilac casually spun the hilt of his machete in his hand, so that the deadly blade—which I saw Lilac sharpening far more often than was surely necessarily—winked in the sunlight.

The smile dropped abruptly from Mary's face. "Don't threaten me, little boy. Or I will have to set this one on you." With a tilt of her head, she indicated the aytorin standing silently at her side.

Lilac stared back at the cage hiding the monster's face with impassive eyes. I had absolutely no doubt that he wouldn't hesitate in attempting to fight the beastie, even if the odds were in no way in his favour. Lilac was a scrappy little fucker. He'd made it this far. I knew he'd been out alone in the Wastes for a good few years before Anchor and Cat found him. I didn't like thinking about what he'd probably had to do and witness in that time.

"I suppose we'll see what happens if you try to take him," Lilac said in his usual flat, inflectionless voice.

“This doesn’t need to get violent,” Rig said, a hint of desperation bleeding into his tone. “There are other monsters out there. Aury doesn’t want to go with you and we’re not going to let you take him. Can’t you just find a different one?”

“You said it yourself,” Aury said to Mary, his eyes calm as he watched her. “I’m damaged. I wouldn’t look good in your… menagerie anyway, even if I was willing to go with you.”

She scrunched her nose and tilted her head like she was considering his words, watery eyes trailing up and down Aury’s form. Then she nodded.

“No, I’ll still take you. You’re too rare to leave behind.” She made a disgusted face and waved in Aury’s general direction. “Even with the unsightly facial disfigurement.”

Anchor let out a slightly incredulous laugh. “We’re not letting you take him, and he doesn’t want to go. So now I guess it’s time for us to decide what happens next.”

Silence fell, the implication heavy in the air. Lilac was still watching the aytorin with a nonchalant expression, even though I knew he was totally focused on the beastie and his movements, ready to pounce. Rig was rubbing the sleeve of his western jacket anxiously, and Anchor was a wall of tense, wiry muscle. Only Aury seemed calm.

Mary was staring hard at him, clearly trying to work out the best course of action. “You’ve clearly been through the wars, pet. I can give you a safe __”

“He was tortured by the military,” I interrupted, voice harsh. “If you’re working with them, surely you know that already. Surely that’s how you knew to come looking around here in the first place.”

Mary ignored me entirely. “I can give you a safe place to live, where nothing can get to you to hurt you,” she continued. “We could even see if there’s a way to patch up that wing of yours. Would you like that?”

She was talking to him like he was an infant, and it made my jaw clench up hard beneath my mask.

“Thank you, but no.” Aury’s voice was soft and calm.

Mary’s face twitched, mouth pursing. She looked moments away from losing it, from throwing a tantrum, but managed to pull it together. She let out an impatient breath and smoothed down her skirt. “Shame. Well, I’ll give you a bit longer to consider *your* offer, Anchor.”

Her watery blue eyes fixed on Anchor's tense form, before swinging back to Aury. She stared hard at him again, then swept her gaze over the rest of us. I noticed her eyes linger on the gun in my hands, the one tucked into Anchor's belt, and the ever-present machete that Lilac held in a loose grip.

"I'm not a violent person," Mary said, her words making my gut clench with foreboding. "I don't like seeing people get hurt."

"You make monsters fight each other for entertainment," Rig said, incredulous.

Mary gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "Monsters aren't people." She focused on Anchor. "I don't like people getting hurt, which is the only reason why I haven't sent my pet in to simply retrieve the rycke from your camp." She tilted her head toward the aytorin. "You think your wall would stop him?"

Rig was vibrating with tension beside me.

"The wall might not, and I'm sure he's strong, but it would still be twenty of us against you and him," Lilac said casually. "And I think the reason you haven't done that already isn't because you don't want *us* to get hurt. It's because you know, if that happens, that *you* will. Won't you?"

His fingers twitched around his machete, and his green eyes were piercing as they stared steadily at Mary. She glanced at him for a second, then curved away from him with almost instinctive fear, face going pale.

Without directly acknowledging him, she turned back to Anchor. "I'll wait a while longer. Give you more time to reconsider. But I *will* be leaving with the rycke. And I'm not trying to threaten you, pet," her voice grew sweeter, and she gestured at the silent aytorin, "but you'd be silly to assume that this lumbering oaf is my only weapon."

I thought about that creepy little creature she kept with her in her RV. It didn't have any visibly dangerous body parts, but… that meant very little when it came to monsters. I suppressed a shudder, wondering what that thing was capable of.

When Anchor didn't respond, Mary's eyes suddenly flared, her expression deviant when she looked at Aury. "Your friends might get hurt, pet." She made a face as though the thought upset her. "If my aytorin has to come into that camp looking for you…"

Alarmed, I looked up at Aury. My gut clenched with fear when his big eyes turned to me, suddenly unsure. Worry tightened his features, creasing

his brow.

“No,” I snapped before she could continue trying to manipulate him that way. I grabbed his hand. “Don’t try and make it his fault. If you send your beastie into our camp to get him, we’ll be ready to stop him.”

Rig made a very soft noise of distress beside me, but I couldn’t bring myself to look over.

Mary’s face went red with anger. Movements jerky, she pointed a finger toward the thick, heavy padlock keeping the aytorin chained to the side of her RV. “I could just unlock him right now and—”

“I’ll cut your hands off before you reach that lock,” Lilac told her conversationally.

Mary paled, and I saw her eyes dart to the door of the RV. I remembered the revolver I’d spotted in there before. Guess she hadn’t felt the need to bring it out here with her, too confident in thinking she’d won. Looked like she was regretting that fact now.

“My aytorin will kill you if you do that,” she said to Lilac, voice shaky, and I was pretty sure she didn’t actually believe the words even as she said them.

“Then I’ll aim for your neck instead, and we’ll both be dead.” Lilac raised one narrow shoulder in a tiny shrug. “And don’t forget we have Nun up there on the wall. She has excellent aim.”

God, I’d never been more grateful for Lilac’s creepy, slightly psychopathic personality. He’d successfully unnerved the hell out of Mary. She swallowed, taking a step back. “Anchor, I’ll give you another week to make your decision. And then I’m sorry, but we’ll be taking the rycke by force from your camp. It’s up to you if you’re willing to put all those people at risk for one damaged monster.”

I wanted to bare my teeth at her for her callous words, but my mask got in the way. I tightened my grip on Aury’s hand, squeezing his fingers as I started tugging him back with me. “Let’s go,” I muttered, relieved when he followed me without protest.

The others came after us, Lilac lingering the longest, watching Mary to make sure she didn’t do anything while our backs were turned. I heard him whistle up to Nun before he started walking away, the signal we had to stay alert, and heard her give the signal back. I knew that meant she’d be aiming her crude crossbow in Mary’s direction, giving Lilac time to walk safely around the camp wall until he was out of her sight.

We were all silent as we made our way back into camp, everyone heading straight for the diner without being told. My heart was pounding in my chest, palm damp inside my glove where it gripped Aury's hand too tight. She was going to send her monster in here to get him. And there was nowhere for him to hide in here. Nowhere to run.

I was close to hyperventilating by the time we made it inside. "I'm not going to the Topeka camp," I said loudly to no one in particular. Bo and Daisy both looked up from the kitchen through the hatch. "I'm not leaving Aury if she's planning to—"

"Ghost." For once, Aury's soft voice didn't soothe me, nor did his long fingers threading briefly through my hair.

"I mean it, Anchor." I turned to face her, causing Aury's hand to fall away. I was bristling as I stared at her, daring her to argue with me. "I'm not going. Send someone else."

Her bushy brows were pulled together in an anxious frown as she stared back at me. I could tell she was deliberating whether to try and convince me to still go or not. Or maybe she was going to pull rank and order it.

I was pretty sure I would tell her to go fuck herself if she did that.

"I'll go," Lilac said, but Anchor immediately shook her head.

"You need to be here."

"I'd argue that Ghost needs to be here too," he replied shortly, and a wave of gratitude washed over me. But an awkward silence descended, because we were all thinking the same thing. Lilac was the cold, unfeeling killer who wouldn't hesitate if Mary or her beastie tried anything. I wasn't.

"I have an idea."

Aury's low voice cut through the silence. Despite his quiet demeanour, his presence was somehow still so commanding. Everyone turned to look at him immediately, and I couldn't help but be proud of my sweet monster as he stood there so calmly. I could easily picture the way he'd hunched over, shying away from our gazes, when Cutter had started spouting accusatory shit at him from the diner a few weeks ago. It made my throat ache to see how much better Aury was doing now. How much he'd blossomed from the scared, traumatised and injured beastie he'd been when we found him.

"What's your idea, Aury?" Rig asked in that gentle voice he reserved only for him.

Aury looked at me, his black eyes steady. "We'll go together," he said.

I stared at him dumbly. "Huh?"

Aury smiled a little. “I’ll come with you. To the other camp. And after a few days, when we’re far enough away, Anchor can tell Mary that I’m gone.” He looked at Anchor. “You could even let her in to check for herself, so she can see that I’m not here.”

He looked back at me. “And then when she’s gone, we come back.”

I was already shaking my head. “It’s too risky. She’ll come looking for us.”

But Anchor pounced. “If I give you a few days’ head start, you’ll be safely at the Topeka camp by the time she even sets out from here. And if she’s spotted nearby, Wick will give you refuge until it’s safe to travel back.” She gave me a beseeching look. “Aury’s idea is a good one, Ghost. It protects him *and* the camp by getting Mary to leave.”

“How can we be sure Wick’s camp will accept Aury when we get there?” I said through gritted teeth, because she was right—it probably was the best solution—and I really didn’t want to admit it. The thought of Aury out there in the Wastes, exposed and vulnerable, made my stomach hurt.

“They’re not bigots. We know they’re not. They’re friendly with Moth.”

“Moth doesn’t really look like a monster. Aury does,” Lilac said bluntly.

I saw Anchor narrow her eyes at him. “I’ve known Wick a long time. He’s not a bigot. He’ll be fine—especially if you tell him there’s some nasty bitch out there trying to capture Aury. I’ll write a letter with my seal that you can give to him when you get there.”

I blinked at Anchor in shock, because it wasn’t often she spoke like that about other people. She stared back at me, willing me to agree. *Everyone* was staring at me, waiting for my response. Bo and Daisy wore matching expressions of sympathy as they watched me through the hatch. I wanted to shrink away from the scrutiny. My hairline beaded with sweat at having to make such a big decision right this second.

“I—” I licked my lips nervously and looked up at Aury, then back at Anchor. “I want one of the good guns,” I told her. We had a cache of good weapons with some ammo that were kept locked up in the old bar with all our other supplies. Rainy-day weapons, Rig called them. In case of a bad attack on the camp.

Well, I fucking wanted one.

“Fine,” Anchor said quickly. “Whatever you need, just tell me. You too, Aury.” She shot him an uneasy smile.

“As long as Ghost has whatever he needs to keep him safe,” Aury said, and his voice was uncharacteristically terse. “He’s been almost hurt or killed too many times.”

There was a long pause. Lilac’s face was impassive as ever, but his eyes were fixed intently on me. Anchor had gone totally still. Bo and Daisy had too, watching this all unfold from the kitchen. Daisy looked almost relieved at Aury’s words.

Rig turned to stare at me with a confused frown. “Huh? Your trips out always sound totally uneventful. You never mention coming across monsters. Not up close, anyway.”

“Of course he comes across monsters,” Aury answered. “It’s the Wastes. They’re everywhere.” He looked directly at Anchor. “There was an awful one in the military base when he went back. It chased him. And it nearly got him.”

“What?” Rig took a step closer, brown eyes frantic with worry. “You didn’t tell me that. You said you heard something in there, so you got out, and that was it. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrugged, uncomfortable, half of me wishing Aury hadn’t said anything and the other half pathetically happy that he was defending me. “I was fine.”

“But you nearly weren’t,” Anchor snapped, brows pulled together. “Does that happen a lot? How often?” she demanded.

I wanted to roll my eyes. “Come on. You’ve all been out there. You all know what it’s like. Why are you acting like this is such a shock?”

“Because you always told us nothing had happened!” Anchor burst out, hands balling into fists by her sides. Her shoulders were tense, almost hunched up by her ears. “How are we meant to know you’re almost getting fucking… eaten by beasties every time you go out there if you don’t tell us?”

I went red under my mask. “Because someone has to go out there regardless, and I…” I shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know. You said it yourself before, Anchor. It’s my job. It’s what I’m good at. It makes me useful.”

“I don’t want you to be useful if it’s at the expense of your life!”

That actually almost made me laugh. “That’s bullshit.” The moment the words left me, my stomach went jittery with nerves. I couldn’t believe I’d spoken to her that way.

Anchor looked equally as taken aback. “What? No, it’s not.” She stared at me. “Do you honestly believe that, Ghost? That I care more about how useful you are than you as an actual person? Than your life?”

I hated this. I hated these questions. I hated all this attention. I wanted to get away.

Despite all that, I found myself blurting, “You only care about finding Cat!”

Awkward tension filled the room. Anchor’s forehead went ruddy. “That’s not—”

“Yes, it is.” The words were flowing out of me now, unstoppable. I felt hot and sweaty, but I powered on. “You keep sending me out there to look for him when we *all know* I’m not going to find him. I’m not, Anchor. I would have by now. He’s gone.”

Anchor’s wiry frame was trembling. “He might be—”

“*He’s not*,” I yelled, gripping Aury’s hand too tight. I felt him squeeze me back, giving me silent encouragement. “If he’s not dead, he’s long gone from here. But *I’m* not. *I’m* still here.” I was breathing too hard. “But you don’t care that *I* might vanish, every time I have to go out there. That whatever got him might get *me*.”

Anchor swallowed hard. “I do care—”

“Stop sending me out there to look for him, then.” My eyes were watering with frustration, and I hated it. “Stop making me go on all these pointless journeys, because every time you do, you’re telling me that my life is worth less than Cat’s. Less than the miniscule chance of me finding him.”

Anchor sucked in a tiny, shuddering breath, but stayed silent for a long time. Everyone did. Aury squeezed my hand again, thumb rubbing against the inside of my wrist. I was panting, face red and hot. Now that the words were out there, part of me wanted to cringe and take them all back, make them all unsaid. I tried to tamp down the insidious stab of fear that Anchor was going to kick me out of camp for speaking to her that way. For defying her.

“I’m sorry.” Anchor’s voice was thick when it cut through the silence. “I didn’t… You don’t have to go to the Topeka camp.”

I let out an unsteady breath and shook my head. “We’ll go,” I said, squeezing Aury’s hand, “because it might make Mary leave. But I’m… This is the last time, Anchor.” My stomach went watery with nerves, but I forced

myself to say it. “I’ll still go out scavenging for the camp, but no more pointless journeys just to look for Cat.”

She sucked in another shaky breath. At length, she nodded, her dark ponytail bobbing with the movement. “That sounds fair,” she said, voice barely above a whisper.

I swallowed and nodded, feeling fidgety under the intense gazes of everyone in the room. I glanced at Rig and regretted it when I saw the hurt and sadness in his eyes as he stared at me.

I took Aury’s hand and started tugging him with me as I backed up to the door. “We need to go get ready to leave.”

No one stopped us as we escaped the diner. Aury gave me a worried look. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

I shook my head, squeezing his hand. “It’s fine.”

I was already worrying about the fallout from that confrontation, the hissing voice in my brain telling me that bad things were going to happen now, that Anchor would stop viewing me as useful. I’d still go out scavenging, but maybe she would tell me not to, just to be snide because I’d made a fuss. It wasn’t like I could cook, or fix stuff like Rig. I could sew, but how useful a skill was that on its own? What if I became dead weight?

But as we walked toward our rooms, a larger part of me began to drown out the worry. I was jittery with adrenaline—with the exhilarating rush that came from finally voicing everything I’d wanted to say for months, like the satisfaction of lancing a blister.

Before I could pull Aury into my room to start packing my bag, he stopped us and turned to face me. “Gage,” he murmured softly, so no one else would hear. Long fingers slid down my arms to tangle with mine through my gloves. “I’m proud of you. For saying something.”

I flushed. “Thanks.”

Aury’s dark eyes watched me carefully. “I was worried you weren’t going to,” he said, then shot me a self-deprecating smile. “I know better than anyone that change will never happen if you just do nothing. I sat in that military base for a very long time, stagnating, because I did nothing.”

“That’s different,” I said, rushing to defend Aury even from himself. “You were kept chained up.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Aury shook his head and squeezed my fingers. “This isn’t about me. Promise me you won’t let the camp start treating you that way again. I know you don’t like taking risks, don’t like the thought of

making Anchor annoyed with you. But nothing will change if you don't take the risk. I know you worry about your place here, about feeling useful. But you *are* useful, Gage, even when you're not risking your life in the Wastes. You're important. Hopefully Anchor will see that now."

I squirmed with discomfort, not knowing how to respond to the praise. "Okay," I said quickly, trying to disentangle my hands and take a step back. "We better go pack—"

Aury wouldn't let me go. "So I'm sorry it caused upset, but I'm not sorry I told them about what really happens out there. Because you never would have brought it up if I hadn't, but you would have carried on resenting Anchor for sending you back out."

His words made me flinch, because they were… Even if they were true, I didn't like the implication. That I was a coward. I knew I was a pushover. A massive fucking pushover. I guess that meant I didn't have a backbone either.

"Okay," I repeated in a mumble. "I'll try and grow a backbone, I guess. Keep standing up for myself."

Aury made an impatient noise. "That's not what I meant and you know it." He stepped closer and shot me a crooked, wry smile before pressing his lips to my forehead. "Rig is right. You overanalyse everything."

I huffed, face going red. Aury leaned back to look down at me with a little smile. "You are wonderful, my sweet Gage, but you're being a bit of a martyr about this." He snorted. "And that's coming from me. Ryckes are martyrs by nature."

That made me splutter a laugh. "So you're the authority."

Aury gave me a mock-solemn nod. "Yes."

I huffed again and squeezed Aury's fingers. "Alright, fine. I'm… I guess it's good they know what it's really like now."

Aury nodded again. "And now you will have a proper weapon with you. I like Rig, very much, but his pipe gun looks like it's more likely to kill the shooter."

I snorted at that, wishing I could lean up and kiss Aury. I tugged on his hand instead. "Let's go inside so I can take this mask off."

Aury grinned at that, because he knew what would be coming the moment my mask came off and we were in private. The adrenaline was still riding me—the rush of standing up for myself for once—and I knew he

could already interpret the gleam in my eye. He followed me into my room without another word.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

We set out before dawn, when the sky was just beginning to lighten and the air was freezing. My breath left me in little puffs of smoke as Aury and I made our way out of the never-used back entrance to the camp, hidden between two old truck beds, amongst the trees past the vegetable patch.

My body was still pleasantly humming with the lingering warmth of the orgasm I'd had before we left, when I really should have still been sleeping. But Aury had coaxed me awake by trailing kisses across my shoulders, then rolled me onto my back and climbed on top of me so he could take us both in his fist. His copious pre-cum had made the slide of our hard cocks feel mind-numbingly good with slippery friction. Coupled with the texture of the thick veins all over his shaft against my dick, it hadn't taken long for me to start rutting into his fist and panting desperate grunts against his mouth. Aury had come just moments after me, trembling over me and moaning into my mouth until his fist, our cocks and my stomach were covered.

The chill of the early morning air made me shiver, snapping me out of the hot memory and chasing away some of that warmth. I clutched Aury's hand tight in my gloved one while he led us through the shadowed trees, able to see in the dark far better than me.

We had to take a long, indirect route through the forest in order to start heading south without the risk of being spotted by Mary's aytorin outside the RV. By the time we were far enough away from the camp for some of the anxiety over her coming after Aury to have faded, the sky was a faint purple.

It was weird, but being out here in the Wastes with Aury was… not terrible. We hadn't spotted anyone or anything else yet, so it was just us, wild, empty fields and the faded, cracked asphalt of old, neglected roads. We walked hand in hand for several hours, before stopping so I could have a small breakfast of pemmican and a dense flatbread that Daisy had made the day before.

The rest of the day was uneventful. With every hour that passed, I grew less and less anxious about Mary coming after us. We'd still have to be careful, but now that there was distance between us, my worry over her snatching Aury up had lessened.

We didn’t see many beasties. And those that we did see left us alone—when they spotted us, they moved quickly in the opposite direction. We spent the first night resting in the manager’s office of an old warehouse, and despite how creepy the echoing building was in the dark, it all felt so different with Aury there. With Aury’s arms wrapped around me all night, keeping me warm, watching over me while I slept. For once, the Wastes didn’t seem so bad.

“Is that it?” Aury asked as the tall metal sheeting surrounding the old high school came into view after we’d been walking for a few days. “The other camp?”

I nodded, tightening my grip on Aury’s hand, nerves swarming in my belly like angry bees. I had the letter from Anchor in my bag, and I knew she was right—Wick had never been overly prejudiced about beasties before. But we still had to walk to the camp entrance, a long stretch of time where we’d be vulnerable, out in the open. If they decided to shoot Aury on sight, there wasn’t much we could do.

I could see the little figures of raiders keeping watch on the roof of the low, sprawling building of the former high school. As we got closer, one of them raised something to their face, then gestured at their companion. I realised they had binoculars, which meant they’d definitely already spotted us.

“Okay. Okay,” I said to myself, exhaling shakily.

Aury squeezed my hand. “It will be fine, Gage,” he said, voice calm. “You’ve been here before, haven’t you? Are they likely to recognise you?”

His voice soothed some of my nerves, enough for me to nod. “Yeah, they should recognise me.” I let out another long breath.

We were nearly at the entrance to the Topeka camp, and I could see activity inside as the raiders on the roof called something down to people on the ground, hidden from us by the tall metal fence. Nerves fizzed in my gut, making me jittery.

And then, for reasons known only to the deepest, darkest recesses of my anxiety-driven brain, I blurted out, “I love you.”

Aury froze instantly. When I realised what I’d said, my entire body went hot with embarrassment. Panicking, I ripped my hand out of his grip and

fluttered it uselessly, casting about for something, anything, to say to distract him.

“Gage.” Aury turned me to face him, his black eyes so beautiful and warm as he smiled down at me. “I love you too.” He laughed, and my throat ached at the sight of his happiness. “You have terrible timing. I can’t even kiss you.”

I broke out into a grin so wide beneath my mask that the plastic edges dug hard into my cheeks. Unspeakable happiness filled me, temporarily chasing away all the nerves and worry of walking into the raider camp that loomed at our sides. “Later, you can kiss me as much as you want.”

Aury laughed again and reached up to brush his fingers over my temple and through my hair. “I plan to.”

His other hand reached up too, both of them cupping my nape in a gentle grip as I looked up at him. The pinpricks of colour swirling in his black eyes seemed to glitter in the sunlight, inhuman and beautiful.

“I love you, Gage,” he repeated, making me practically vibrate with the need to rip my mask off and kiss him. “I will be forever grateful that you found me that day. I owe you so much.”

I shook my head, reaching out to grip his sides. I wondered for a second what the Topeka camp raiders were thinking as they witnessed this, but I didn’t care. “You don’t owe me anything.”

Aury’s eyes dropped to my mask, and he made a small, frustrated sound. “Let’s get this done so we can find somewhere safe for the night.” He leaned forward and kissed my forehead. “So I can show you just how grateful I am.”

He was grinning wickedly at me when he stepped back. I cleared my throat, resisting the urge to reach down and adjust my dick as it twitched in my pants. I was very aware of the raiders watching us, waiting for us at the now-open gate of the Topeka camp.

“Okay, let’s do this.” I took a breath and laced my gloved fingers back through Aury’s.

When we reached the camp entrance, I recognised the raider who greeted us at the gate. I nodded at Sun, who did the same back without speaking. Her dark, wideset eyes were tense above her black mask, which had a rotting zombie mouth hand painted on the front. They darted to Aury, then back to me.

I grew tense when she glanced back into the camp before looking over at the other raider holding the gate open. I recognised him as Hall, another raider who'd lived here for a while, and who I'd met on my visits before.

When he nodded once at Sun, eyes guarded, my stomach tightened into a worried knot.

"We've got a letter from Anchor," I told them warily, tightening my grip on Aury's hand. He remained silent beside me.

Sun clutched her gun tighter and glanced back into the camp again. When she looked back at me, her brows were pinched. "You have to—"

"Let them in!"

The voice that boomed out was unfamiliar, and Sun's shoulders stiffened. She went perfectly still for a few moments, until Hall took a step forward. "Come on," he said in a low voice.

I could see a small group of people standing at the entrance to the building in front of us. From this distance, I couldn't recognise any of them, but I assumed Wick was the one standing in the centre of the group, flanked by several raiders holding guns.

We walked slowly into the camp, Aury's wings rasping as they trailed limply over the ground. I looked around, trepidation tightening my gut at the sight of all the raiders standing around watching us.

"Close the gate," the voice boomed again, making me jump. I realised that the person standing in the centre of the group watching us definitely wasn't Wick. That wasn't his voice, but he'd been the one to speak.

Unease glued my feet to the ground, my hand sweating in my glove as it gripped Aury tight. He squeezed my fingers but didn't speak.

"My fellow campmates here tell me you're from the northern Nebraska camp." The raider at the centre of the group broke through and walked toward us with a loose stride. "Who's your beastie friend?"

I stared at the raider as he approached. Tall and thin, he wore a ragged brown beanie on his head and a dark-green mask. He held a rifle in his hands, and his leather jacket creaked as he approached. He was clearly someone with some kind of authority here, judging by the way all the other raiders watched him, waiting for his move. I'd never seen him before.

"You're not Wick." My voice was hoarse with nerves. With the realisation that I had just made a very, very stupid decision by walking inside the camp walls. The gate was shut behind us now. We were trapped.

The raider let out a chuckle. “No, I’m not,” he agreed amiably. “There’s been a change in leadership. I’m Ryker.”

His voice was pleasant, but his eyes were cold and assessing as they trailed over us both. They lingered on Aury, taking in his damaged wing and the scarring on his face, before dropping to stare at our still-linked hands. His eyes were void of emotion, making it impossible to tell what he was thinking.

I swallowed, my throat dry. “Where are Wick and Vesta?” I asked, and sensed Sun tense just behind me.

Ryker cocked his head. “They decided to move on.”

I shook my head straight away. “They wouldn’t have done that.”

His eyes went even colder, but his tone remained unnervingly pleasant. “Well they did. Luckily my crew were taking shelter here at the time, so I was able to step up and look after all these people.”

He was lying through his teeth. He gestured at the raiders watching, and I caught the gaze of one. A dart of fear stabbed through me when she stared at me with wide, scared eyes, clearly trying to tell me something. I could guess what.

I’d heard rumours of camps being taken over. Camp leaders being killed and others seizing power. Wasn’t like it was a new phenomenon among humans. It was the reason some camps were so hostile and wouldn’t let anyone inside, even traders.

Wick and his wife had always been welcoming. It looked like it had finally caught up with them.

Aury was gripping my hand tight, as tense as I was. Ryker stared at him again for a long moment, before looking back at me. “So. Ghost.” I felt uneasy at the sound of my raider name coming out of his mouth. One of the others must have told him as we approached. “To what do we owe the pleasure of this unexpected visit from you and your… beastie friend here?”

I swallowed, unsure of what to do. I couldn’t tell him about Cat. If he knew our camp was vulnerable, even a little…

“I… We wanted to know if you’d heard anything about a woman called Mary.”

Ryker gave us a mock concerned face, so false I wondered who exactly he thought he was kidding. Or maybe he didn’t even care that it was clearly disingenuous. “Hmm, no. Who’s Mary?”

“She… I…” I was panicking, second-guessing every word I considered saying. “She collects monsters.”

Ryker chuckled. “Does she?” He looked at Aury. “And you thought… what, you could hide out here for a while?”

“No,” I said immediately. “We just came to see if you’d heard of her. We don’t need any help defending our camp.”

There was a pause. “I *am* interested in finding out more about your camp,” Ryker said in a light tone. “Apparently it’s practically a fortress. Safest camp in the Wastes, thanks to its wall.” He gave me a faint smile. “Bet you can keep a lot of valuable stuff in a camp that safe.”

I tried to calm my breathing, but my heart was hammering in my chest. I licked my dry lips behind my mask. “No more than any other camp. Just enough for us to get by.”

Ryker watched me for a long moment. My breath left me in a shaky puff when he glanced back at the group of raiders behind him, all holding guns. He looked back at me, gaze intent. “If there’s a scary lady out there trying to steal your monster friend,”—I gritted my teeth at his patronising tone—“then maybe a few of my most trusted men should accompany you back to your camp. Just to make sure you get there safe.”

I took a step back, tugging Aury with me, and jumped when my shoulder bumped into Sun. “No. We’re leaving. Alone. Open the gate.”

No one moved. Sun was vibrating beside me. Aury’s fingers squeezed mine, so tightly that for a second it felt like he would break them.

“Open the fucking gate,” I gritted out, taking another step back, shoving Sun out of the way. I wasn’t willing to turn my back on any of them.

“Sorry, but no.” Ryker did a half-decent job of sounding regretful. “Why don’t you let go of your beastie friend here and come inside for a chat.”

“No.” I gripped Aury’s hand tighter.

Ryker’s eyes turned hard. “I’m afraid it’s non-negotiable.”

He was like a parasite. Him and his men. They’d come into this camp and taken over for an easy ride, and now they could see the opportunity for an even easier one. My panicked brain was already trying to think of indirect routes we could take back to camp—if we made it out of this one—so they couldn’t follow us. Because if they got in, we’d be just like all these other raiders standing round watching this unfold. Scared and controlled.

My breaths were leaving me in shallow bursts. I wondered if I’d have enough time to reach back and grab my gun. I didn’t think so, considering I

could count at least ten already pointing at me. The crowbar at my hip was useless. I'd be shot before I'd even swung it at the nearest raider.

When I didn't move, Ryker rolled his eyes and turned to start walking toward the school entrance. "Grab him," he said to one of the other raiders, who immediately started striding forward.

I stumbled back a few more steps until my back hit the closed gate, dragging Aury with me. "Don't come near us." My fingers twitched, readying to grab my gun, even though it already felt pointless.

"Ghost." Aury's low voice was tense, and he tried to free his hand from mine, but I wouldn't let him. I wasn't going to let them take him anywhere.

The raider approaching didn't waste any time. The moment he was within reach, he cocked a fist and punched me in the side of the face, knocking my gas mask until the hard plastic slammed against my cheek and lip.

"*Fuck*," I moaned, pointlessly reaching up to try and touch my face. I blinked rapidly, trying to clear the dots from my vision. I felt Aury rip his hand from mine.

"Oh my god," someone stammered from close by. I thought it might have been Hall.

Then someone else let out a hoarse shout. A high-pitched voice screamed. Hands grabbed at me, and I swung my gaze around, dazed from the punch, my chest heaving. I saw Sun's dark eyes widen with terror as she stared at something behind me, trying to tug me away. When I shoved at her, not trusting her in the slightest anymore, she gave up and turned, stumbling in her haste to get away.

"Shoot it!" someone cried, and panic streaked through me as I looked wildly around at the raiders now sprinting in all directions—away from us. Ryker was frozen in place by the school entrance, staring at something above me, eyes wide and unblinking.

I turned to grab Aury, but he was gone.

And in his place was something that my mind struggled to process for a moment. My eyes turned up.

And up.

My limbs clenched up, paralysing fear locking me in place.

Because in Aury's place was a true monster.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Something deep in my gut, some instinct far older than me, was telling me to run. Telling me I had to get away. It wasn't my typical flight response—it was deeper. I was reduced to a mere animal, to prey, and the only thing pounding through my skull was *run run run run run run RUN*.

But I couldn't. I couldn't move. My limbs had seized in terror, which had never happened to me before. I was frozen in place, mere feet away from this… *thing* that now stood where Aury had been, just seconds ago.

It was frighteningly tall, easily twenty feet, towering above me. Four-foot-long barbs covered in jagged teeth jutted from the length of its spine, dark and flexing like they were *eager* to impale something on them. Its skin was greyish white and looked almost too thin over ropey, sinewy muscles streaked with prominent dark veins as thick as my fingers.

Swallowing hard, trailing my gaze up, I took in its hunched over form; its barbed back heaving with rage-filled breaths that were loud and growling. Long, bony fingers tipped with greyish-green talons thicker than my arms flexed menacingly, leaving deep furrows in the ground in front of it.

Its face was horrifying. I had a sudden memory from a book I'd taken from Cat's room—an old book about sea creatures. In it had been a picture of a goblin shark, with its huge, protruding jaw that it could push out from its mouth to swallow prey whole.

That's what this thing reminded me of. Its mouth was big and gaping with a revolting protrusion filled with thick, sharp teeth. Its eyes were massive, round, endless black holes. Its nose was nothing but a cavity in the centre of its face, like it had rotted away.

It swung those eyes to me.

My breath caught in my chest, terror streaking through me, turning me into a statue as I stared back. The thing only looked at me for a split second before it was gone, almost giving me a heart attack as it sprang away on powerful legs.

Where was Aury? Panic tightened my chest as I looked around frantically, trying not to let the huge monster out of my sights, even as a

very small part of me started whispering what I hadn't wanted to believe at first.

Chest heaving with panic, I looked back at the monster. At those huge, bird-like feet with the deadly talons. At the wings. One flexing rhythmically, like it was desperate to stretch out, the other ruined and limp and shredded.

I jumped violently when one of those feet came down directly on a raider as the monster rushed toward the school, moving terrifyingly fast. It was like it hadn't even seen the guy. Like he was a bug that could be squashed without a second thought. There was a horrifying cry of agony, and when the monster's taloned foot lifted back up, the raider was crushed, his belly ripped open. I thought it might have been Hall, but I didn't want to look too closely to make sure.

I choked on a shuddering breath, wanting desperately to look away as the monster—as Aury—grabbed another raider's head, the entire thing vanishing in his huge grip, and tightened his fist like it was a grape to be popped. That had been Sun. *Oh god.*

Aury's wings were enormous, almost blocking out everything around him, and as I stared in horror, the ruined one twitched. Faint light, like electrical pulses or the last embers of a long-burning fire, crackled along the strips of fluttering membrane… knitting them together.

In moments, his shredded wing was whole again.

Aury let out a deep, ground-shaking sigh as both wings rose, flexed, and stretched out to their full width, which was… mind-bogglingly huge. His wingspan had to be at least sixty feet.

Raiders were screaming, fleeing in every direction, many trying to vanish inside the building. Not a single one of them was attempting to stay and fight back, because it was painfully obvious that fighting was utterly futile.

Aury ignored them all for a moment as his wings twitched, shivered, then flapped once. I staggered back, slamming into the gate behind me as the gust of wind hit me. Then those wings flapped again, making an impossibly loud sound, before Aury was in the air.

A dark, ominous sound rose from him as he cast his enormous, demonic shadow over the entire compound. I felt sick when I realised it was laughter.

This was like a nightmare. Like some old horror movie. And Aury was the hideous, terrifying monster hellbent on murdering everyone.

He dove.

The raiders' screams grew sharper and more piercing as sheer terror imploded throughout the camp. Blood was spraying, arcing into the air, screams getting cut off with wet gurgles and horrified sobs. Body parts flew. Entire bodies were *crushed*.

Aury grabbed a raider in each taloned fist before rising into the air, higher than before. I choked on my own breath, already dreading what I knew what was coming—he was going to drop them.

But he didn't. He didn't just drop them—he *flung* them, as hard as he could, so that their bodies sailed through the air like limp rag dolls. The two raiders were unrecognisable when they landed amongst the rubble, just mounds of viscera that spattered everywhere. Bile pushed against the back of my throat, making me retch, and the mask still covering my mouth was the only thing that made me hold it back.

He roared a terrifying, inhuman sound as he dove again. He not only ripped apart every moving thing in sight, but the entire camp. He tore thick metal sheets apart like they were tissue paper, destroying the camp wall. Brick buildings were reduced to rubble with a flick of his hand. The overwhelming beat of his wings sent fleeing raiders staggering, a few nailed by flying debris, bricks and metal slicing their backs as they ran.

And in the middle of it all I stood, trembling, frozen to the spot. Watching an entire camp of raiders—one of the oldest and biggest in the Wastes—completely destroyed in minutes around me.

He didn't leave a single raider alive. One was sliced in half from their groin to the top of their skull with an errant swipe of a talon. Another he tore in half at the waist, flinging both halves in opposite directions, with a spray of gore and intestines that unravelled for too long before they hit the ground wetly.

He ripped into the vast building, reducing it to rubble in minutes, searching the wreckage for hiding raiders like a bloodhound that had caught a scent. Single-minded determination drove him to destroy every living being in the vicinity. Except me.

There was a faint whine in my ears, the embodiment of the panic and terror rushing through me that had no outlet, because I was still frozen in place like my boots had been cemented to the ground. I was trembling violently, and as I blinked, I realised everything was silent over the frantic pounding of my heart.

The beast—Aury—had landed. He had stopped massacring.

He was looking at me.

A disconnected part of my brain wondered for a moment if he'd seem less horrifying now that he was no longer moving and ripping human bodies apart like tissue paper. But no. He still was. He was terrifying. Hideous. Nightmare-inducing.

I exhaled a shuddering breath and tried to take a step back as I looked into those huge black eyes, fixed on my face. I jumped hard when the metal gate behind me let out a loud creak and slowly tipped, the ruined camp wall no longer strong enough to hold it up. I jumped again when it hit the ground with a loud crash, sending a long section of the half-fallen fence tipping with it like a line of dominoes.

Something flinched through Aury's grotesque face. "Ga—*Ga*—"

He struggled to speak over that protruding jaw, his voice like a volcano eruption rumbling under my feet.

He took a lumbering step toward me, too-long arms dragging before one reached up toward me. I stumbled back another step, panicking. My heart felt like it was about to explode.

Pain twisted in those liquid eyes. "Ga—*Gage*," he managed this time, and hearing my name—even in that terrifying, distorted voice—made something in me soften.

This is Aury. This is Aury. I had to keep repeating it in my head, because my instinct as he took another step closer was to turn and run. As far away as I could get.

I was stiff and trembling as Aury reached me and crouched low on his haunches, craning his neck down and twisting his body so he could keep looking at my face. I wanted to cringe back when hot gusts of breath ruffled my air, when that monstrous, protruding jaw got too close. Drool dripped thick on the ground in front of me. It was steaming hot and dark red.

Aury had used his teeth to tear apart a lot of those raiders.

"*Gaaage*," he warbled again in that distorted, impossibly low voice. "*Not… sss-scared… puh—pluh—ease…*"

I gritted my teeth. Unable to look at him, my heart still racing like a rabbit being chased, I nodded once. "I'm okay." My voice was stiff and too thin to be believable.

Aury let out an inhuman, anguished moan, and I couldn't stop myself flinching back when a long black claw stroked my side, shockingly gentle. I

stumbled and nearly tripped over the fallen gate behind me, my boot slipping on the metal.

Terror made my limbs spasm when Aury let out an inhuman bark of sound at the sudden movement, that huge head twitching in some monstrous resemblance to Aury's usual nervous tic. "*Pluh—pluh—ease no… ssscared*," he begged.

"I'm fine," I barked too quickly, wanting to step away from that huge claw. From that hideous mouth. I forced myself not to, partly because I didn't want to upset him, but mainly because I wasn't sure if any other quick movements would trigger his predatory instincts.

Fuck. Fuck. I was on the verge of a panic attack. What would he do if I ran? Could I bring myself to do it? This was still Aury. Could I run from him?

Would he let me?

I had to do something. I swallowed hard and made myself look up into those huge, round eyes. They seemed to glow from within, like a dark fire was burning in the very depths of Aury's monstrous body. The scared, uncertain expression was so out of place on the horrifying face of a creature I'd just witnessed tear a human body to literal shreds. Those liquid black eyes were somehow ancient and painfully innocent at the same time.

"It's okay, Aury," I managed to say, my voice fairly calm and soothing. He visibly reacted, eyes softening in that hideous face. Bloody drool still dripped from that protruding upper jaw, the gums mottled black and grey, stretched thin over thick teeth.

I exhaled a quiet, trembling breath. "Everything's okay," I crooned, not even sure what I meant. Everything was definitely *not* okay. "You're safe now. You can—"

Gunfire blasted, making me jump violently, and I saw Aury's black eyes flare back to full alertness at the sound and my sharp movement. Terror turned my legs as soft as butter, but then those eyes swung to the side. Instinct made me follow his gaze.

A stupid, *stupid* raider, still alive somehow, was shooting at Aury with a rifle. They were hitting him too. He was hard to miss, given his size. The problem was, though, that he wasn't reacting in the slightest to the bullets sinking into his side. Like he couldn't even feel them.

I flinched when a stray bullet whizzed past me, and Aury's huge body coiled. With an inhuman roar, he launched himself at the raider, who

screamed and began firing even more wildly, but Aury continued ignoring the bullets even when they were plugging his jaw and cheek.

"Aury—no—" I finally burst to life, stumbling forward a step, but he had already reached the raider. After batting them down with barely a tap of his hand, he simply… smashed his palm down on top of their body.

The gunfire stopped instantly. There was a wet, crunching sound that made my gorge rise, causing me to swallow convulsively to hold back the vomit. I looked away before Aury could raise his hand, but from the corner of my eye I saw him literally *scrape* the eviscerated remains of the raider off his palm onto a bent sheet of metal.

Oh god. I was going to be sick. My heart was pounding, and I had no idea what I'd say or do when Aury's huge, horrifying form lumbered back over here. How could I comfort him? I'd just watched him massacre an *entire camp of people*. I'd just watched him *squash* a person with his *hand*.

Aury roared again and smashed down a half-standing building, crushing the bricks to dust. He tore an entire tree straight from the ground, its long roots dangling in the air, soil showering down with the noise of rain on a roof. He flung it away, impossibly far. His spiked, hunched back was heaving with loud breaths as he looked around for any other movement, anything else he could destroy, eyes wild with the need for more violence. More destruction.

It was that hungry look in his eyes that made me speak up. I had no idea if anyone else had managed to survive—I didn't see how it could be possible—but I wanted to at least give them a slim chance of getting away.

"Aury," I bit out, trying to soften my voice, but it was still shaky.

He turned to look at me immediately, and I swallowed hard at the hopeful lift in his eyes as he loped toward me.

"*Ga—Gaaage*." He stopped in front of me and reached out with one huge hand, stained with blood and gore. I flinched back before I could stop myself.

Aury let out a low, distorted whine, and I could sense his distress. Taking a deep breath, I tried again.

"It's okay." With a shaking hand, I reached out and touched one huge finger. His sickly, green-tinged white skin looked damp and clammy beneath my gloved palm. "You need to stay calm, Aury. Calm. Can you do that for me?"

I had no idea how I was talking. How I was forming coherent sentences, when every time I blinked, I saw raiders being ripped apart and Aury's grotesque form trampling fragile bodies like they were insects.

Aury exhaled a heavy, shuddering breath. I gritted my teeth at the metallic scent that drifted over, swallowing back bile. He shifted closer, talons as thick as my legs curling at the ends of his feet, cutting into the hard ground like knives through soft butter.

"*V-voice,*" he rasped, a huge hand petting my neck and shoulder, somehow achingly gentle. Thick drool dripped onto the ground from his efforts to talk around that protruding jaw. "*Talk… calm… p-pluh—ease…*"

I nodded quickly. "I'll keep talking. I—" My mind was agonisingly blank. "Um—I—Did you see the fig trees we passed on the way here? Maybe we can pick some when we go back. I love figs. I know you don't have to eat but maybe you can try one…"

I rambled on. My palms were sweating in my gloves and my heart was still racing, but it was working. My voice was soothing Aury, and slowly, his features were becoming less monstrous. His body was shrinking, those deadly barbs along his spine getting smaller. His wingspan decreased, but his right one—the one that had been ruined—miraculously stayed whole and undamaged.

Relief rushed through me when Aury's familiar face finally returned, but it was short-lived. He was even paler than normal, big dark eyes shadowed. Red blood still coated his mouth and chin, and I knew it wasn't his, because his own—dark green and viscous—was dripping down his cheek.

He was shaking violently, naked and pale, his head twitching. "G-g-gage __"

My knee-jerk reaction was to comfort him. To rush forward and take him in my arms and try to soothe him. My chest ached at the sight of Aury's obvious distress.

But I couldn't. I couldn't get my feet to move. Even though Aury's familiar face was back in front of me, I kept seeing what it had just been. I kept seeing the human blood dripping from his gaping maw. Kept seeing him scrape a fucking raider off his palm like it was a stain.

When I didn't move, Aury's brow creased with anguish. "Gage." He took a single, hesitant step forward, but stopped abruptly when I couldn't suppress my flinch.

Heavy silence filled the space between us.

“I’m sorry,” Aury eventually whispered, wrapping his arms around himself. His head jerked again.

I didn’t know if I wanted to laugh hysterically or burst into tears. *He was sorry?* He had just ripped apart dozens of people. In minutes.

“I don’t…” I reached up and wiped a hand over my sweaty forehead, screwing my eyes shut for a moment. “I’m not… the one you should be apologising to.”

Not that he even could apologise to the ones who deserved it. They were all dead.

Aury’s chin trembled. “I didn’t… I couldn’t let them hurt you. They were going to hurt you.”

“So it’s *my* fault?” I exploded, knowing I was acting irrationally, but his words made me defensive. Was he saying he’d done this… *for me*? That wasn’t fair.

Aury flinched, heading twitching. “No.” He took a beseeching step closer to me. “I won’t ever let anyone hurt you, Gage. And they were… I just meant—”

“We need to get away from here,” I interrupted. I didn’t want to hear this. I didn’t want to stand here surrounded by the reminders of what Aury had just done. *For me*. I gritted my teeth, a small part of me wanting to curse him for putting this on me. On my conscience.

I was apparently the reason all these people were dead.

Swallowing back bile, I strode to the nearest raider whose clothes hadn’t been torn to shreds. Trying to keep my mind blank of what I was doing, I stripped off their pants and coat, turning my face away from the gaping wounds in their neck. After ripping long tears in the back of the coat so it would fit over Aury’s wings, I carried the bloody clothes over and thrust them into his arms. He fumbled to take them before they fell to the ground, still trembling.

“Get dressed.”

I turned and started walking without waiting for him. I heard him scrambling into the clothes, and then the familiar rasp of his wings trailing over the ground caught up with me moments later.

“Gage, p-please—I’m s-sorry—”

“We need to move,” I said flatly, swallowing back bile when I had to skirt around a spinal cord still coated in gore.

Aury’s voice was anguished. “You mean everything to me—”

“Stop talking,” I barked, stomping through the ruins of the camp—now nothing but a blood-soaked killing field—even faster in my desperate desire to get away from all of it. “Just shut up, Aury. We need to get away.”

I couldn’t hear this. I couldn’t handle it. Because a large part of me still wanted to turn to Aury and pull him into my arms and tell him everything would be okay. Tell him I still… cared for him.

And if I could still feel that way about someone I’d just witnessed massacre dozens of people with palpable bloodlust—with *glee*… what did that make me?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I knew it made me petty, and a heartless piece of shit after what I'd just witnessed, but all I could think as Aury and I trudged in silence away from the ruins of the raider camp was: *Cutter was right*.

He'd been right about Aury all along, and I loathed it.

I didn't want to turn around and look at him. At my sweet monster, who just last night had kissed me with desperation and buried his face in my neck to breathe in my scent. Who clung to me when I slept and made me feel important and loved and worth something more than my ability to sneak around and not get murdered by monsters in the Wastes.

But he couldn't just be those things anymore. I knew I'd no longer see that person when I looked at him. I would see that hideous, monstrous face with bloody teeth tearing fragile human bodies apart. I'd see those thick talons ripping through flesh like butter. I'd see those frighteningly huge wings stretching out to lift him into the air, looming over us all like something out of a nightmare.

I could hear Aury's hitching breaths behind me, like he was on the verge of a panic attack, and my heart squeezed hard in my chest. But I still couldn't bring myself to turn around. I had to get away first. I had to get the remains of the camp out of my sight, because I couldn't bear to look at it and know that dozens of human lives had just been snuffed out because of me.

This was my fault. I'd trusted Aury. I'd brought him here with me. And Aury… Aury had murdered them all *for me*, he'd said. To protect me.

My lips trembled under my mask as we walked in silence. I didn't want his protection if it looked like that. Surely he knew that? *Surely*, he knew that I would have never wanted him to slaughter a whole camp-full of people, just because one of them hit me?

Had he lost control? I just didn't understand it. Aury had told me that his kind abhorred violence. He'd seemed so unhappy when we'd told him what Moth had said about him—about his kind being terrifying to all others. I didn't think that was all an act. All lies. But it was hard to cling on to that belief in the face of what he'd just done.

Besides, Aury had told me himself about how violent his species had been, when there was more than one rycke. How every interaction between ryckes had been about death and rage and tearing each other apart, even in the act of sex. So maybe this was his true nature, and it had just been buried deep. Maybe Aury was finally discovering what he was supposed to be like, and that was a horrifying monster hellbent on death and destruction.

The thought made me want to weep.

We walked for hours in silence. The familiar rasp of Aury's wings trailing over the ground followed me, but now it was interspersed with a new sound—a faint flutter, like the snap of fabric when you shook out a coat. It sounded like his wings flexing every now and then, the under-used muscles no doubt eager to stretch and contract.

I refused to stop, even when my bladder started to protest and my stomach growled with weak hunger. Neither of us spoke. Every time the sound of Aury's hitching breaths behind me made my chest hurt and I almost turned around to comfort him, another image flashed in my brain of him ripping bodies apart. Crushing people in his fists.

We were both still silent when we reached the river we'd crossed the day before. Without stopping, I changed trajectory and started following along its bank, knowing we'd come across the bridge we needed to cross eventually. There was a beastie on the other side of the river, one I'd seen out here before, which was covered in dark hair and had a long neck and frighteningly blank face. It took one look at Aury and scrambled away on its six, short legs.

At least I finally knew now why every other monster seemed instinctively terrified of him. At least I finally knew that Moth had been telling the truth.

I didn't turn around to see if Aury noticed the other beastie, even though the small, terrified part of me whispered that he might have turned back into that thing at the sight of it. Fear made my stomach flutter, and I increased my pace.

But then Aury's trembling voice stopped me dead, the first time I'd heard it in hours. "Please—I need to…"

I took a breath, preparing myself to turn around. When I did, Aury was on his knees at the edge of the river, frantically trying to wash the blood from around his mouth. His hands were shaking violently, head bowed and back hunched.

I stared at him. When my gaze dropped to take in his trembling form, his pale chest bare under the stolen coat, my eyes abruptly filled with tears. The coat I had sewed for him was gone, torn to shreds when his body grew into that monstrous form.

I swallowed hard. Then again. “Are you okay?” I eventually managed to say, trying not to think about the way Aury’s jaw had grown and forced its way out of his skull, gigantic teeth dripping with gore.

Aury’s head gave a violent twitch before he looked up at me, and my heart clenched when I saw the fresh, dark-green blood trickling down the unscarred side of his face. I’d forgotten that he’d been hit by bullets. A lot of bullets. I took an abrupt step closer to him, worry for him momentarily overriding the overwhelming fear and shock at what he’d done.

“I couldn’t control it,” Aury said. His voice wobbled, head twitching again. “I couldn’t—I didn’t mean to…” He broke off, looking away when his chin trembled.

My eyes burned. “It’s okay.” I stepped closer and crouched down beside him. After the briefest hesitation, I reached out and rested one gloved hand on Aury’s shoulder. “You’re okay, Aury.”

He looked over at me and sniffed, mournful eyes swimming. “What have I done?”

Shit. I rubbed my hand down Aury’s arm in what I hoped was a soothing gesture. “It doesn’t matter.” It did. “Why don’t we—”

“I’m so sorry.” Aury’s eyes were unfocused, dazed, and his breathing sped back up. His voice was as fragile as glass. “I’m sorry, Gage. What have I done?”

I pulled my hand away and swallowed thickly, watching him. I couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

He looked at me again, anguish shining in his liquid eyes. “Don’t hate me.” Fat, milky tears dripped down Aury’s pale cheeks, mingling with his jewel-green blood. “Please. I’m sorry. I didn’t—I promise—”

“Aury, I don’t hate you.” I closed the final gap between us and pulled Aury into my arms, feeling him hunch over even more to bury his face in my neck. He shuddered, and I felt my throat get wet.

“I’m sorry,” he sobbed, trembling. “I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t—You don’t—” I had no idea what to say. I didn’t want to tell him not to be sorry. He’d just slaughtered dozens of people. But… he

was a monster. Was this his true nature? Was it some animalistic instinct he couldn't help but follow?

Aury pulled back and cupped my neck, sending a sharp dart of fear through me. He stared at me with red-rimmed, overflowing eyes, brows pinched in desperation. "I've never—I've n-never hurt anyone before. Please believe me, Gage."

I stared back at him. "I—I believe you," I heard myself saying. And I realised it was true. I did believe Aury. I still believed what he'd told me before. I didn't think he wanted to hurt anyone. I didn't think he knew that he would turn into that… thing. He seemed as shellshocked as I was—more so, even. I wasn't sure if he'd even truly processed what he'd done.

Even though it brought some comfort, the realisation caused fresh worry to stab through my brain. Because if he couldn't control it—if he hadn't been able to stop himself from doing what he'd done back at the Topeka camp—then there was no way I could take him back home. There was no way we could live there if there was a chance of Aury turning into that monstrous being again at any random moment.

I swallowed hard and pulled Aury into my chest again, trying to give him some comfort. I stared into the rushing water of the river beside us and considered our options. We didn't have any. I couldn't risk the rest of the camp. And I couldn't risk them discovering what Aury really was and trying to hurt him.

I imagined Cutter and the other raiders finding out what had happened here today and cutting Aury down in the centre of the camp. And then I imagined Aury turning into that terrifying creature again and ripping Rig and Lilac to shreds in a fit of uncontrollable bloodlust.

I shuddered, tightening my arms around Aury. The worry swirled through me like a tornado, making my chest heave with panic. I had no idea what I was supposed to do.

We stayed kneeling beside the river for a long time. Eventually we both calmed down, enough for me to take Aury's face in my hands and examine his wounds.

"Do they hurt?" I asked, gently thumbing away some of his deep green blood.

Aury shook his head, eyes closing as he turned his cheek into my palm.

"I need to get the bullets out," I muttered worriedly, but Aury shook his head again.

"They're gone already. My body pushed them out. Rejected them."

I exhaled with relief. "Okay." I pulled down my mask so I could kiss his uninjured cheek, the burn-scarred skin rough under my lips. "We should find somewhere to rest for the night."

The sun was setting, the sky washed with pink and violet. On any other day, it would have been beautiful, but the smell of blood was still in my nose, and I could see remnants of gore on Aury's stolen clothes.

I got to my feet, my legs shaky, and helped Aury stand. He looked equally as unsteady, and the sight of him standing there dazed and trembling in those unfamiliar clothes, his chest pale and bare and vulnerable, broke through the last of my lingering hesitation toward him. He was still the same. Still my Aury.

I rested my hands on his naked chest and leaned up to kiss him. Aury's lips clung to mine, reluctant to stop as he kissed me back with aching desperation. Like he'd been scared he'd never be able to again.

"Gage," he whispered when we finally broke apart, voice trembling with emotion again.

I stepped back and shot him a weak smile before pulling up my mask. We couldn't afford to go back down that rabbit hole. I wasn't sure I was mentally equipped to handle it.

"Come on, we need to find somewhere safe before it gets dark." I took his hand, threading my gloved fingers through his and squeezing. "Then we'll talk about what we're going to do."

Aury's delicate brows furrowed, even as he clung onto my hand. "What do you mean?"

I swallowed, tugging him forward to get him walking. "Just that… We've just got a long walk ahead of us."

I looked over at him, taking in the sweep of soft, black-green hair that hid his face from me as he walked with his head bowed. His wings stood taller now that the damaged one was fixed, but they still dragged on the ground, huge and majestic, the setting sun glowing through the paper-thin membrane.

An overwhelming swell of emotion hit me. "I meant what I said before —I still mean it," I told him, voice thick. "I love you. Whatever happens,

we’ll be together. I won’t—I’ll make sure of it.”

I wasn’t going to leave him, even if it meant never going back to the camp. Even if the grief at the thought of never seeing Rig again was almost crippling. It was for the best. For everyone.

Aury’s eyes shot to me, a hint of worry creeping into them as he searched my face. He nodded. “Together,” he echoed, squeezing my hand tighter. “I love you, too.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY

Further up the river, we came across the cabin we'd slept in the night before. It was a decent size and surprisingly clean inside, although it had been stripped almost down to its bones by the nearby raider camp. The only loose furniture that remained were a huge, solid wood dining table and an old, sagging couch, both of which were too large to fit through the door. The kitchen counters were cleared, every cupboard door hanging open, their interiors bare. A big stone fireplace took up most of the wall opposite the couch, and there was a rectangular patch in front of it where the floorboards were a darker, richer colour. There had probably been a rug there at some point. Raiders really did take anything that could prove even the slightest bit useful.

Without much discussion, we stripped down and washed up in the river. It was clear we were both trying to wash the day away. I was mercifully free of any blood, but Aury's hair and face and hands were smeared with it—both his own and others'—and he scrubbed hard at his skin in the cold water until it was raw.

When he started shaking violently again, breathing hard and head twitching with his nervous tic, I coaxed him back inside and helped him pull his stolen clothes back on over wet skin. I wished I'd taken a shirt from one of the raiders for him. I searched the cabin, but every item of clothing was long gone, no doubt scavenged years ago.

"I'm sorry you don't have a shirt," I said, my voice sounding loud in the still silence of the cabin.

"I don't mind," Aury said, looking over to smile at me from where he sat on the old couch. "I don't really feel the cold." He was still trembling though, arms wrapped tight around himself.

I wanted to comfort him, but I didn't know how. I didn't know how to try and alleviate the guilt I could tell he was feeling for the mass slaughter of an entire camp of raiders. Could he remember doing it? Or was it like… a black out when he turned into that thing? I didn't want to ask him in case it upset him even more, but I knew that we were going to have to discuss it at some point soon. Very soon.

We needed to work out where we were going to go. Where we were going to live that was safe. Where Aury wouldn't be found by the military or Mary or whoever else was out there wanting to capture him and keep him chained up. My head started to hurt, and I tried to push the thoughts away as I walked over to the big table and shrugged my backpack off. I couldn't do anything about any of it right now. I needed to try and clear my head, just enough to get some rest so I wasn't running on empty out here. Even though it was clear now why other monsters avoided Aury, this was still the Wastes. It was still dangerous.

I carefully set the rifle down on the table, as well as my mask and jacket, which I hadn't bothered putting back on after our bath in the river. I knew I should eat something, but I couldn't bring myself to do it just yet, my stomach still roiling. Instead, I pulled out my canteen and had a small sip of water just to wet my parched throat.

The light was fading outside, and we didn't have a light source, which meant soon it would be dark in the cabin. I stood there staring at the scuffed, gouged top of the table, wondering if I'd even be able to sleep. From the corner of my eye, I saw Aury stand up from the couch and hesitantly make his way over, so I forced myself to look up and smile at him.

His eyes were bleak with worry. "I can—If you're worried, I can leave," he said as I turned to face him, screwing the lid back on my canteen and setting it down on the table. "I can come back in the morning. If you don't… feel safe sleeping with me here."

My insides crumbled. "Aury, no." I stepped closer and laid my palms on his bare chest. There was no heartbeat, but I could feel the life coursing through his veins. "I'm not… I'm not scared of you now." As I said it, I realised it was true. "But we should…" I hesitated. "We should talk about what happened. At some point."

Aury flinched. He sucked his lower lip into his mouth and, at length, nodded. "At some point," he said in a trembling voice. "But not now. Not tonight. Please." After a moment of hesitation, he wrapped his arms around me. "I need you, Gage. I don't want to… I can't think about it right now."

I nodded immediately and reached up to cup his cheek. "That's fine."

Aury leaned down to kiss me, his mouth trembling against mine. His arms tightened, pulling me closer until I was plastered against him, and it

didn’t take me long to realise what he’d meant when he’d said he needed me.

I didn’t know whether to be ashamed when a throb of arousal pulsed through me, tightening my groin. Was this disrespectful, that I could need Aury this way after… what had happened? Was I sick in the head? Maybe I was. Maybe there was something wrong with me, that I could still love this monster after witnessing what he was capable of.

I shoved all those thoughts away as I kissed Aury back with increasing need, suddenly desperate for him. We pulled at each other’s clothes frantically until we were naked, and even though the air in the cabin was cool, I couldn’t feel it as I backed Aury up until the backs of his thighs hit the edge of the table. Once I’d urged him to sit, his discarded coat beneath his ass, I sank to my knees in front of him.

Aury’s dark brows pinched with lust as he gazed down at me, long fingers stroking my cheek. “Gage,” he rasped, and I stared back up at him as I dropped a kiss on his thigh. Then another, closer to the crease of his groin.

When I licked up the side of his cock, Aury’s head fell back on a sharp exhale. His wings gave a mighty thump on the table behind him. I swirled my tongue softly over the head before licking down the other side, and heard the rasp of his wings over the tabletop as they flickered in reaction.

I nuzzled his sac briefly, just to hear his breathless moan, but I was eager to suck him, so I quickly licked my way back up to the head, which was leaking now. I made a soft sound of pleasure as I kissed the wet tip, tonguing the tiny slit for more.

“Gage,” Aury moaned again, thighs trembling under my arms. I sucked him into my mouth, as deep as I could, using the tip of my tongue to trace the fattest vein that coiled up the underside of his shaft. His cock throbbed in my mouth.

I was painfully hard, and I reached down to give my cock a stroke where it hung between my spread knees. Aury moaned and leaned back on his elbows on the table. I slid my mouth free to watch as he brought his knees up, propping those dark, taloned feet on the edge of the table, thighs spread wide.

“Please touch me,” he rasped, the tilt of his hips making the true meaning of his request obvious.

My dick throbbed so hard in my fist at the sight that I had to let go of it, worried I'd come. I raised my hand and trailed my fingers over his tight sac, caressing until he sucked in a sharp breath. I let my fingers dip lower, until they brushed over his hole.

Our eyes met over the stretch of Aury's body as I circled the tiny pucker with my fingertip. When I leaned in to drop a kiss on his inner thigh, close to his tight sac, Aury shuddered.

His chest was heaving as he gazed down at me, brows pinched with arousal. "Use your tongue," he begged.

I moaned low in my throat at the request, already leaning back in as I palmed Aury's inner thighs and pushed them higher. He groaned, hands reaching out to grip the edges of the table either side of him for balance.

His breath left him in a heavy rush when my tongue swirled over his hole, wings twitching from their trapped position beneath him. I slicked my tongue over the sensitive stretch that led to his balls before returning to that tiny pucker, licking frantically, moaning at the taste of his skin.

When I pushed the tip of my tongue just inside him, Aury cried out, his hips jerking. "Gage." His arms were shaking as he gripped the sides of the table, staring down at me, his black eyes wild. "I need you."

My cock bucked at the implication. I stood up fast, gripping his inner thighs tight. "Do you—"

"Don't make me wait." He let go of the table with one hand to reach down and slide his fist carelessly over his cock. He'd leaked so much pre-cum that it was covered, glistening, making my mouth water.

My hips jerked as he fisted my dick, slicking it from base to tip. I watched, trembling with lust, as he gathered more pre-cum from his belly and reached down to hurriedly circle his hole, pushing a finger briefly inside.

"Now," he pleaded as he returned his hand to the table edge, gripping tight. "Please."

"Fuck." I slid my hands up and down his inner thighs, making him shudder, as I stepped closer until the wet tip of my cock nudged his taint and trailed lower. "A-are you—I need to prep you—"

Aury shook his head frantically. "No, I don't need it. I promise. Please." He was panting, black eyes liquid and endless as he gazed at me. "Please."

I had to trust his word. I swallowed thickly as I let go of his thigh to grasp the base of my cock, shuddering with pleasure from just that touch. I

dragged the head over his hole and moaned when Aury's asshole twitched before he bore down.

"Oh, shit." My legs went weak, voice trembling with unimaginable lust as the head of my cock slipped inside Aury's body after a brief moment of resistance. He was unbelievably tight. And *hot*.

Aury groaned from deep within his chest, his body trying to suck me in the rest of the way. I gripped his inner thighs tight with splayed fingers, keeping them spread wide as I watched where our bodies joined hungrily, so I could see my cock slide the rest of the way in.

The sight of it alone nearly made me come, but when Aury shifted and his ass tightened around my dick, my knees went weak. "Holy shit," I gritted out between clenched teeth. "I'm not—I'm not gonna last. You feel so good."

Aury sat up abruptly, changing the angle and making everything get even tighter around my dick. I moaned helplessly, shuddering, my fingers tightening and biting into his skin.

Long fingers clenched my hair and dragged my head forward, and then Aury's mouth was devouring mine, his forked tongue thrusting deep. "Fuck me, Gage. Please," he rasped against my mouth, his breaths fast and shallow, before he kissed me again like a dying man.

My hips jerked of their own accord, burying my cock as deep as it could go in Aury's hot body before pulling halfway out. I did it again, my sac tightening at the sound of Aury's hitching moans against my mouth with each thrust. He was bent practically in half, but it didn't seem to bother him as he gripped the table edge tight with one hand, the other still clenched almost painfully in my hair. His wings jerked behind him, like they were reacting to the pleasure.

Our tongues fought for dominance, Aury's kiss far more aggressive than usual. The sounds coming out of him became more animalistic as I fucked him harder, faster, but they only made me even more frantic with lust. It pulsed through me, spreading like a fire, and I could tell Aury was feeling that same intense pleasure because his cock was jerking between us, pre-cum dripping in a constant stream and getting everywhere.

I grazed my teeth over his lower lip before breaking the kiss, needing to suck in some deeper breaths. Aury watched me, black eyes tight with lust as he leaned back, the hand that had been clenched in my hair returning to the

edge of the table to hold on. I hooked my arms under his spread thighs until the backs of his knees rested in the crooks of my elbows.

Aury groaned and bared his teeth in a pleasured snarl, staring down the length of his body to watch my cock tunnelling inside him. His own dick was an iron bar on his stomach, glistening with pre-cum, even more spilling down his side and onto the table beneath him.

Oh fuck. That sight alone was going to make me come. It was barrelling up on me, tightening my thighs, my ass, my lower back. The fire burned hotter in my belly, pulling my balls up to hug the base of my dick tight.

"Aury," I croaked, and at the sound of my desperate voice, his face softened just a little.

"Let me feel you, Gage." He tilted his hips even more.

I was unable to resist. Gritting my teeth, my hips started hammering, pounding my cock inside Aury's hot body. He clenched up around me, and everything exploded.

I let out a helpless sound as I started to come, sinking my cock as deep as I could and hunching forward over Aury's prone form as I was wracked with intense spasms of pleasure. I gasped for breath, my hips punching forward with each spurt of cum into Aury's body. It felt never-ending, and one last weak spurt left me when Aury groaned and his own hips jerked, his cock pulsing jets of cum onto his belly.

I was sucking in breaths when I slid my cock free and let Aury's legs drop. My knees were shaky as I leaned down, resting my hands either side of Aury's hips, and sucked his still-hard dick into my mouth with a moan. Aury cried out, letting go of the table to reach down and fist my hair. I sucked and licked him clean, and as I was pulling off his cock with the intention of licking up everything on his stomach, he shuddered and started spurting again into my mouth.

I moaned, swallowing rapidly as Aury gasped and shook above me. When it ended, he collapsed back onto the table, boneless. Even his wings were limp beneath him, as though they too were dazed from pleasure. I smiled up at him, chest swelling with love and satisfaction when he looked down at me with unfocused eyes. His brows pinched when I dipped my head to drag my tongue through the mess he'd made on his stomach.

Aury exhaled a trembling breath. "I love you," he whispered as he reached down to stroke my cheek.

My insides twisted with longing. I kissed a clean patch on his belly, nuzzling him there. “I love you too,” I croaked, meaning it with every part of me.

I didn’t care what he could become. I didn’t see that monstrous face when I looked at Aury. This was my sweet, gentle, kind monster. He was still my Aury.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“Did you know?” I asked him a while later, when we were twined together on the sagging old couch in the dark cabin. “That you’d turn into that… into something else?”

We were on our sides, facing each other, with one of Aury’s wings tucked under me. The other, he’d draped over my body, cocooning us together and blocking out the rest of the cabin. The huge, jutting talons loomed over us, but I wasn’t worried. It made me feel safe. The cool, leathery feel of the membranes was actually pleasant against my skin. I’d pulled my pants back on, but left off my shirt for the time being.

Aury gazed at me with big, solemn eyes. “I knew that my… I had memories of my ancestors. Of the rage and bloodlust.” His gaze went unfocused. “But I’ve never… I didn’t…” He fell silent.

I licked my lips. “What triggered it?” I asked, dreading the answer that I thought I knew was coming.

Aury watched me, and for a second he looked scared of what my reaction would be if he admitted the truth. “They hurt you,” he whispered, then rushed out, “I’m sorry. I don’t mean that it was—I’m not trying to—”

“I know,” I interrupted. I already felt like shit for trying to make it seem like he’d been pinning the blame on me earlier, but it had been a knee-jerk reaction. “But you… you said you couldn’t control it. Right?”

Aury shook his head. “When I saw that raider hit you, it just… came out.” His eyes filled with tears. “I couldn’t stop it.”

I cupped his cheek, stroking my thumb over his scarred skin. “It’s okay.” We were both feeling calmer, and I didn’t want Aury to get upset again. It wouldn’t erase what had happened.

I took a deep breath and looked at him, into his big eyes, two dark holes in the glowing pallor of his face. “We need to decide what we’re going to do.”

Aury’s straight, dark brows twitched into a tiny frown. “What do you mean?” he asked, thumb stroking the base of my throat as his long fingers cupped the side of my neck.

“We can’t go back to camp, Aury,” I said, voice cracking. “Not if you… if there’s a risk that will happen again.”

He was silent, staring at me as if he hadn't even considered it before this moment. He licked his lips, forked tongue starkly black against the white of his skin in the dark. "You can't not go back."

"What?" I frowned. "I can do what I want. I don't have to go back there."

"You can't give up living there for me." Aury's features tightened with worry. "It's safe in the camp. Protected. You have food and water and—"

"I'm not leaving you," I told him fiercely. "We're staying together, Aury. We'll find somewhere new to live. We'll be fine."

Aury looked frantic. "It's too dangerous out here, Gage. You won't be safe."

I watched him. "Are you… worried that *you* might hurt me?"

Aury shook his head. "No. I know deep down I never would. I couldn't. I knew that even when I was…" He stopped himself. "But there are still so many other dangers. And it's not just that. You need other people, Gage. You don't want to be so isolated. Stuck with just me."

That almost made me smile. "Aury, I'd be happy if I never saw anyone but you and Rig ever again."

His face softened but remained sombre. "But you *wouldn't* ever see Rig again."

The thought sobered me immediately, and I felt my throat bob hard as I swallowed. "Rig would be safe and happy in the camp. As long as I know he's safe, then I don't—I don't mind." It wasn't true, but there was no alternative.

Aury was shaking his head. "I can't let you give anything up for me—"

"Aury." I gripped his face tighter, forcing him to focus on me. "It's not up to you. It's up to me. I love you. I *want* to stay with you."

He stared at me, and I could tell he wanted to say something else, but I also got the feeling he knew he wasn't going to win this argument. My jaw was already set in a stubborn line, and I kept my gaze steady as I looked at him.

Eventually, he pursed his lips. "Where would we go?"

I'd started thinking about this. "We can't go west, because that's where Mary said her menagerie is. What about south?"

"The tear is to the south. The closer you get, the more monsters there are." Aury shook his head. "It's not safe."

“It’ll be too cold if we go too far north.” I paused, thinking. “What about north-east? Toward Wisconsin? I don’t know what it’s like around the Great Lakes, but we could check it out.”

Aury was watching me quietly. He gave a tiny shrug of one shoulder. “Whatever you think is best, Gage.”

“But are you happy with that plan?” I asked worriedly. “We have to be on the same page, Aury. We’re in this together.”

Aury leaned forward to kiss me. “I will do whatever keeps you safest,” he said, and kissed me again.

I kissed him back, trying not to let my lips draw down into a frown. That felt like a non-answer to me, and I wasn’t sure I liked it.

Despite our change in plan, we carried on heading north for the time being. I was hoping to scavenge some items we could trade at the outpost near Omaha, and if that failed, we also had the market near Des Moines. I was already worrying about what I’d do for food and water. I would no longer have the luxury of a group of us working together to survive. I’d be doing it all on my own now.

When we started approaching Lincoln, we adjusted our course to skirt around the eastern edge of the city perimeter, rather than the west, which would have kept us on track to the camp. It truly hit me that I’d never see the camp again. I’d never see Rig again, or Lilac, or Apollo or Anchor.

For a brief, desperate moment I wondered if maybe we could go back first, just so I could say goodbye—just so Rig wouldn’t worry about me being dead. But I couldn’t. It wasn’t safe—for anyone. And if Mary was still there, she’d be right on top of us when we’d have to leave.

An ache settled in my chest, but I stayed quiet as we walked. I wasn’t going to make Aury feel guilty for it. It wasn’t his fault, and I knew if I told him I wanted to go back to the camp without him, he’d agree without hesitation. But I wasn’t going to leave him. I couldn’t bear the thought of leaving him. So here we were. Heading out together into unknown parts of the Wastes.

We’d been heading north-west toward Omaha for over an hour when we reached the edge of a tiny town—one of many around here. I was considering whether to search all the houses for things to scavenge when

movement outside of an old coffee shop made me grab Aury's arm in a tight grip, stilling him.

It was a kid. He didn't look any older than seventeen—the same age Rig had been when he'd been thrown out into the Wastes—and he was wearing dirty, ripped jeans and a faded yellow t-shirt. His blond head was bent low, obscuring his face.

He was crouching beside an upturned trash can, tattered backpack straps looped over thin shoulders as he hunched over, picking through garbage. His backpack was flat. It didn't look like he had anything in there at all.

Something in me crumbled. He looked thin and dirty and scared. There was a long graze down one forearm and a hole in the side of his t-shirt, showing pale skin underneath. I couldn't see a single weapon—not even a bat or a crowbar or *anything* he could swing to defend himself.

I called out before I could second-guess myself. "Hey."

The boy's head jerked up, and the overwhelming relief that flooded over his features loosened the knot of tension in my chest. He scrambled to his feet and stumbled toward us.

"Oh my god, I'm so glad to—" He drew up short when he seemed to finally notice Aury, eyes growing wide with terror.

"He's okay," I said quickly, lacing my fingers through Aury's. "This is Aury. We're not going to hurt you."

The boy hesitated for a moment longer, but desperation and relief at finding other people won out, and he hurried closer. "I haven't seen anyone else since I got kicked out of the city," he said, already tearful. "And then something started chasing me and I just—"

"Are you hurt?" I asked, looking him over. The graze on his arm looked a couple of days old.

The kid shook his head. "I managed to get away, but it was close." He gulped. "And then last night I was pretty sure something was outside the house I slept in, but it was too dark to see."

He looked at Aury again, eyes wary but fascinated. "So you're a… you're a nice monster?" he asked, sounding painfully young.

There was a pause before Aury nodded, but the kid didn't look any more reassured.

Wide blue eyes turned back to me, dirty blonde bangs obscuring his brows. "I've been trying to find stuff—you know, supplies—but there's

nothing out here." He sounded despaired. "Everywhere's been stripped bare."

"Why *are* you out here?" I asked.

The kid flushed. "I got kicked out of the city for stealing cash from the register of the hardware store I worked in." His eyes filled up with tears again. "They didn't even let me say goodbye to my mom."

I exhaled, reaching up to rub a gloved hand over my forehead. This kid would be dead within hours if we just sent him on his way. I was surprised he'd made it this far into the Wastes from the coast.

"We're heading toward a trader outpost," I told him. "You can come with us 'til we get there. Then you can grab supplies, and we can…" I hesitated. "Maybe we can point you in the direction of a raider camp."

"Oh my god, thank you so much." The boy sniffed and hitched up the strap of his backpack as it slipped down his skinny arm.

"You have to stay quiet," I told him. "Stay alert. If I tell you to run, you run. If I tell you to freeze, you do it. Okay?"

He was nodding eagerly. "Yeah, yeah, of course."

I let out a breath and glanced at Aury, silently asking him what he thought. He shot me a small smile back, giving me a tiny nod as he squeezed my fingers.

I looked back at the boy. "Okay, let's go."

He fell into step beside me, jittery and anxious, as we started down the main street of the town. "I only just started looking around here, so maybe we'll find something good in one of these houses," he said, words tripping together in his haste to get them out.

"We'll look, but stay quiet," I said, somewhat impatiently. I was used to being alone out here, and suddenly I had two companions to worry about. I squeezed Aury's fingers again, just to reassure myself that he was with me.

"Oh yeah, shit, sorry." The kid gripped the straps of his backpack, full of nervous energy. "I just tend to—"

Aury suddenly stopped mid-stride, his entire body stiffening a split second before a low, raspy warble filled the air. I froze too, limbs going cold.

The kid vibrated beside me. "What was that?" His voice was already terrified.

"Shut up," I hissed, ears straining, trying to work out what direction the sound had come from. Because that had definitely been a beastie, and it

definitely didn’t sound friendly.

The sound rang out again, and the boy jumped. “Oh my god. Oh shit,” he whimpered, and I gritted my teeth, but before I could tell him to be quiet again, a flash of something big and brown lumbered into view from the side of the very last house in the street.

It was bear-sized, with a domed back that could have been either thick hide or a shell. It was too hard to tell from this distance, but it looked hard and solid, the brown surface gleaming. It had thick, hairy arms and legs that bulged with muscle, and as it turned to face us, I saw its long head ended in a split snout, with teeth sprouting in every direction.

Its body shook with excitement, and that low warbling sound escaped its throat again, hungry and rabid.

“Run,” I muttered to the boy, because he was weaponless and, quite frankly, useless. But he either didn’t hear me or physically couldn’t get his body to move, because he stayed exactly where he was, trembling violently as he stared at the beastie that was slowly padding its way down the street toward us.

Just as I was gearing up to make a grab for the gun on my back, the creature froze and tilted its head up, sniffing the air. When it lowered its head again, I noticed its eyes were long and thin and set far back in its head. It probably had poor eyesight, but it seemed to be good at sniffing out prey.

The beastie made a different sound—a soft, short warble. It took a cautious step back, then another. By the time I realised what was happening, the creature was scrambling back, whimpering with fear, before it turned and lumbered away as fast as it could.

I let out a shaky breath and turned to look up at Aury. He gazed back down at me in silence, but I thought I could see a hint of sadness in his eyes. It was no doubt incredibly lonely, having everything be scared of you. And it wasn’t like there were other ryckes that he could spend time with, even though it didn’t sound like that would have been a better option, anyway.

I squeezed his hand tight, smiling up at him, knowing he’d be able to see it in my eyes even though my mouth was hidden by my mask. After a pause, he smiled back.

“What the fuck,” the boy was whispering, voice trembling with fear. “Why did it—What was that thing?”

“I don’t know,” I said. Aury probably did, but it wasn’t important. “Let’s go before it comes back.”

I was pretty sure it wasn’t going to come back now that it had spotted Aury, but better to be safe than sorry. We carried on walking down the street, the boy trailing behind us, even more jittery than he had been.

When we reached the last house, my steps slowed as unease coiled through me. There was a military truck parked haphazardly in the alleyway between the last two houses, its back doors still wide open.

“Is that—Wait, is that a military truck?” The boy stepped past me, gripping the straps of his backpack tight. He turned back, eyes bright with relief. “If the military’s near here, we can—”

“Stop where you are.”

Every inch of me grew tense at the sound of the harsh male voice from the house to our left. A moment later, the front door opened and a soldier stood in the doorway, tall and imposing and dressed head to toe in black, his face hidden by his sleek black helmet.

Another soldier appeared at the window closest to us, and two more leaned out from upstairs windows on the top floor of the house. All of them pointed rifles at us.

“Oh, thank god,” the kid breathed. My hand shot out to stop him, but he was already stumbling toward the front porch of the house.

“Don’t come any closer,” the one at the front door shouted, voice harsh with a hint of panic. “Get back.”

But the kid was still riding on adrenaline, jittery and spaced out. “Can you take us to a safe zone?” he begged.

“STOP,” one of the other soldiers yelled, and the kid finally listened, but he looked confused as he held up his hands, as if finally realising there was a gun pointed at him. The other three were aimed at me and Aury.

“We just need help,” the kid said, glancing back at me. “I got kicked out of—”

“What are you doing with a monster and a raider?” the soldier at the door asked, voice slightly muffled by his headgear.

The kid glanced back at Aury and me again with a slight frown. “I just found them. They were—”

“That’s one of the specimens from the base,” a soldier in an upstairs window blurted, voice breaking.

“Which one?”

I saw their helmet move as the soldier shook their head. “Don’t know what type, but I recognise it. Don’t think it’s one of the violent ones, but…”

“But it’s scared off that thing,” another said, sounding apprehensive. “So maybe it’s more dangerous than it seems.”

“Who gives a fuck?” the one at the window closest to us said, voice impatient. “The monster that’s kept us trapped here for weeks is finally gone. Shoot this one and let’s go.”

“No,” I burst out, shoving in front of Aury. “Don’t. We’ll go. Just let us go.”

Aury immediately grabbed my shoulders to move me behind him, but the bark from one of the soldiers stopped him dead. “If you move, I’ll shoot him.”

I could hear Aury’s fast, panicked breaths behind me, and I wanted to reach back and comfort him, but I didn’t dare. The soldiers fell quiet. I could feel the eyes of the one at the front door—the apparent leader—assessing me. The kid stood between us at the bottom of the porch steps, confused and twitchy.

“Drop the gun and your pack and you can go.”

I stiffened. “But you all already have guns.”

“Just fucking do it,” the soldier barked, adjusting the grip on their rifle.

I was breathing fast beneath my mask. “You know that’s a death sentence.”

“Yeah, and?” said one of the other soldiers—one who seemed a little less stable than their calmer leader. “You think we give a fuck what happens to a raider out here? Hand your shit over or we’ll shoot all three of you.”

“I don’t have any stuff,” the kid blurted, and I couldn’t blame him for trying to save his own skin. “Just a few protein bars, some spare socks—here, I’ll show you—”

“Stop,” the leader soldier shouted when the boy tore off his backpack and jerked the zipper open, lifting his foot onto the first step of the front porch. “Drop the bag,” the soldier shouted, and I realised with a shot of dread that he thought the kid might be pulling out a gun or some kind of weapon, because he wasn’t listening as he stumbled up the steps and his hand dipped into the bag.

Three sharp pops sounded, making me jump out of my skin, and then the boy was jerking back and dropping to the ground at the foot of the steps like a felled tree. The open backpack landed beside him, its contents spilling

out, a balled-up pair of dirty white socks rolling to the ground in the ensuing silence.

“F-f-fuck.” My voice shook as I stared at the still, lifeless body of the kid between us and the soldiers, three deep-red stains blooming across the fabric of his yellow t-shirt.

Aury made a nose of distress behind me, hands clasping my shoulders with the intention of moving me.

“Don’t fucking move,” a soldier shouted, and then all four guns were pointing at me, because I was still in front of Aury.

I knew what was going to happen even before I felt Aury’s body begin to vibrate against my back.

In an instant I was shoved behind him, and he was rushing toward the house before he’d even finished changing. It was no less shocking the second time, to see that monstrous form straight out of a nightmare, but at least this time it was over far, far quicker. The soldiers barely had time to yell out their distress, let alone shoot, before Aury had ripped them apart and destroyed the front of the building they’d been hiding in.

This time, though, he seemed to be able to control himself better. Once all the soldiers were dead, Aury stood with his back to me, barbed spine heaving with his breaths as he visibly tried to calm himself.

I was shaking, frozen to the spot as I watched him return to the Aury I knew, once again naked. But this time he wasn’t trembling with distress. This time when he turned to face me, I could see only grim determination in his features. He’d protected me, and he wasn’t sorry about it.

All I wanted was to feel his arms around me. My feet finally unglued from the ground, and I took a stumbling step toward him. “Aury.”

He strode toward me, brows pinched with concern. When he reached me, he cupped the sides of my neck with gentle hands. “Are you alright?”

And then I did the least tough-raider-living-in-an-apocalyptic-wasteland-infested-with-monsters thing that I possibly could. I burst into tears.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I was pretty sure I hadn't yet processed what had just happened as we stripped one of the soldiers of his clothing for Aury to wear. We gathered up any weapons, ammo and other supplies that hadn't been destroyed in Aury's rampage.

It had all just been so… fast. We'd found the kid, and the next thing we knew we were being threatened by soldiers who were trapped by a beastie circling their makeshift camp.

"What was the thing stalking them?" I asked Aury as we stacked the undamaged guns together carefully. There was a huge amount of ammo, but hardly any food and water. Empty protein jerky wrappers and blister packs for the military's hydration tabs littered the dirty floors. They'd been stuck here for a while, it seemed—probably since the nearby base fell—and they'd been close to running out of essential supplies.

"A cagin," Aury said, adding a hunting knife to our pile, still protected in its dark green sheath. "They don't eat very often, so when they start getting hungry and find their prey, they will wait it out for as long as it takes. I've heard of cagins stalking their prey for weeks, waiting for the best moment to pounce."

I gestured at the mound of weapons in front of us. "They had all this ammo. Why didn't they just shoot it?"

Aury shook his head. "Bullets wouldn't be able to penetrate its hide. Its weakness is its underbelly. The only way to kill it is to flip it on its back and injure it there, but not many are able to get close enough to do it."

It made sense why there was still so much ammo here, then. The soldiers had probably realised early on that their bullets were useless and decided to conserve them.

I stared down at the pile we'd made. They'd had even more guns than the ones they'd been pointing at us, as well as several knives and a shit ton of ammo.

Realisation dawned, a confusing mixture of dread and relief following it. "We have to take these to the camp."

Aury stood up and watched me. When I looked back at him, he gave me a small smile but didn't speak.

I sighed and gestured at the pile. “We don’t need all these guns. This is more than we can sensibly bring with us. And this is like… winning the lottery out there. This is the jackpot. We could arm half the camp with actual decent weapons with these.”

Aury nodded. “We’ll take them to the camp. If we can find a bag or a sheet to wrap them in, I can carry them all.”

I worried my lower lip beneath my mask. “That’s not fair, you shouldn’t have to carry it all.” I remembered the truck outside. “Maybe the truck still has some fuel in it.”

Aury came over and cupped my face, kissing my forehead. “Maybe. But I don’t mind.”

“We’ll find something just in case,” I said, wrapping my arms tight around his lower back, mindful of his barbs. “We’ll drop it all off at the camp and then we’ll keep heading west, toward Wisconsin. Yeah?”

Aury gazed down at me, long fingers in my hair. At length, he nodded once, then dropped another kiss on my forehead before stepping back.

We found an old sheet upstairs that we managed to turn into a giant sack, which Aury heaved over his shoulder once we’d loaded everything inside it and tied the ends into a knot.

“Are you sure you’re okay carrying that?” I asked worriedly, feeling useless as I walked beside him away from the house. We’d checked the truck, but it was out of gas, so Aury had gently moved the kid’s body onto the backseat of it and shut the doors. It had felt weird, but it was the most respectful way we could handle his body out here. Hopefully at least this way, nothing would come across him and eat his remains.

“I’m fine.” Aury grinned over at me, his first real smile for days. My chest grew warm at the sight of it. “I built your camp wall, remember?”

“Alright.” I nudged him gently, tangling my gloved fingers with those on his free hand. “I get it, you’re insanely strong. My big, strong beastie.”

I had perked up at the prospect of returning to camp, even though I knew we couldn’t stay. At least this way I had an excuse to go back and be able to say goodbye to the ones I cared about. Rig, Lilac, Apollo. Even Anchor, despite how strained it had become between us since Cat vanished.

I understood her actions, though. Despite how bitter it had made me to keep being sent out—even more than I usually was—to search for him, I couldn’t truly resent her for it. She was desperate to get him back—not to help her run the camp, but because they were best friends. They’d been

together for twenty years, surviving together, building something together. And while it had never felt fair that I was the only one being made to go out to all these dangerous places in the Wastes to search for him, that was what happened out here. If you were good at something, it became your job by default. And I was, evidently, good at staying alive against the odds.

That had been made blindingly clear over the last couple of days.

It was dark when we made it back to camp. Normally I wouldn't have risked travelling at night, but Aury could see in the dark to lead us, and everything was scared of him anyway, so the rest of the journey was uneventful.

Mary's RV was gone. I sagged in relief when we realised it, stopping Aury to rip down my mask and plant a long kiss on his mouth. It didn't matter that we weren't staying. It meant she'd given up, and the likelihood was that she was heading back west, while we were going in the opposite direction.

Aury smiled against my mouth before we parted. "At least she won't bother the camp anymore," he said, adjusting his grip on the bulging sheet-sack over his shoulder. I saw him look up at the top of the camp wall, and I followed his gaze to see the outline of a raider up there, watching us. The high ponytail made me think it was Lilac.

"Come on," I said, relacing my fingers through Aury's. "Let's drop this stuff off and say goodbye."

Aury swallowed. "Gage—"

"Aury." I stopped again and turned to face him. "Please. We talked about this. We have our plan. Can we just do this and go? Please?"

Because even though I'd been eager to come back and have the chance to say goodbye, now that we were here, I was already struggling. This had been my home for eight years. It wasn't going to be easy to walk away from, even though I was willing to do it.

Aury said nothing, but I could see the worry in his eyes as we started walking again. It took some manoeuvring to get the sack of weapons through the shipping containers and into the camp. Aury carried it to the dark, empty diner. Once inside, I quickly lit some of the candles that were dotted along the counter so I could see what we were doing.

“Let’s go and wake Rig and Anchor,” I said as I pulled my mask back up over my mouth, adjusting it until it was comfortable. “I think Lilac’s on watch.”

“Gage—” Aury began, but I was already pushing open the door of the diner and walking toward the motel. I didn’t want to linger too long. I was scared that I wouldn’t want to leave if I did. We needed to get everything squared away, maybe take some supplies if Anchor would let me, and go.

In the moonlight, I saw Lilac duck out of the container entrance and head toward me. I met him halfway, Aury coming up behind me a moment later and resting a gentle hand on my back.

“How was it?” Lilac asked, eyes giving me a quick sweep. He looked behind me at Aury. “Your wing is fixed,” he noted in his flat voice.

“We found weapons,” I said instead, because I didn’t know how to answer either of those things. “Can you wake Anchor? I need—We just need to talk quickly.”

Lilac looked between us again, his masked face cast in shadows. He nodded once and walked off toward the far end of the motel block without a word.

“Let’s go wake Rig,” I said to Aury, reaching back to blindly take his hand and tug him with me.

But Aury pulled me to a stop. “Wait.”

I turned to face him. My gut clenched with fear when I saw how drawn Aury’s features were. When I saw the resignation there.

He stepped closer and reached up to gently tug down my mask. Before I could say anything, he leaned down and kissed me. But I couldn’t enjoy it. Worry coursed through me, cold and insidious.

It only got worse when Aury broke the kiss but kept his forehead against mine, his breaths shaky against my lips. “Gage, you can’t—”

“No.” I wrenched myself back and stared up at him, hands in tight fists by my sides. “No, Aury. We’re dropping off the weapons and then we’re leaving together. We’ve talked about this.”

Aury shook his head. “You need to stay here.”

I started vibrating with tension. “I’m not staying here without you.”

“Yes, you are. You have to.” He leaned forward and kissed me again in a rush, cupping my face. “I love you,” he said when the kiss ended. “Tell Anchor thank you. For letting me stay here. And Rig and Lilac, and Apollo for caring for me.”

“No,” I gritted out again. “I’m not staying here. We’re going together.”

Aury didn’t answer. After gently replacing my mask over my mouth, he turned and started walking toward the camp entrance. I grabbed at his arm, and he shook me off easily.

“Stop it,” I snapped, grabbing at his arm again, stumbling to keep up. “Stop fucking walking.”

Aury’s wings extended and gently knocked me loose, and I knew he’d done it on purpose. I clenched my jaw so hard I thought my teeth would crack. “Please stop,” I managed to get out, hoping a softer tactic would work. “Please, Aury.”

But he just shook his head. “This is best,” he said as he ducked inside the container that led out to the Wastes. “You’re safe here.”

How was he so calm? So emotionless? When I felt like I was going to dissolve into nothing? “I want to stay with you.” My trembling voice echoed in the hollow interior of the shipping container as I followed him. “We talked about this,” I repeated, hearing the desperation in my own voice. “We have a plan.”

But he didn’t stop.

My heart was hammering. I could feel my pulse jumping in my throat. My palms were clammy inside my gloves.

When we emerged into the Wastes, panic rose until I was panting fast breaths like a wounded animal. I trailed after him as he headed toward the trees. Fuck, if he went in there, I’d lose sight of him in moments. It was still too dark.

No. No no no—

“We can go right now,” I blurted out, trying to catch up with him. “I don’t have to say goodbye to them. Aury—”

He finally stopped and swung around. “Go back inside, Gage. Please.”

“No.” My eyes got hot. “No. We’re leaving together.”

He just shook his head. “We’re not.”

“Ghost?”

I jumped and looked back over my shoulder to see Lilac appearing from between the containers and taking a step toward us, just a black outline in the weak moonlight.

And when I turned back to Aury, he was gone.

My breath caught in my throat. “You asshole,” I yelled, my throat hurting. I didn’t think I’d ever shouted so loud in my life.

I took off toward the trees.

"No." It took Lilac only a few seconds to catch up with me and grab my arm, pulling me to a stop. "You're not going in there."

"Yes, I am." I tried to shake his tight grip off.

"You'll be dead by morning." Lilac's inflectionless voice was quiet. "I know you've seen things lurking in that forest at night, just like I have."

Irrational fear lurched through me for Aury. Irrational, because I now knew he was the thing all other monsters feared the most, but I couldn't help it. "What if Aury—"

"Aury will be fine." Lilac started pulling me back toward the camp. "Anchor's waiting in the diner."

My vision went blurry. "I have to—"

"I'm not letting you go out there," Lilac said shortly. "No matter how much of a fit you throw about it. So give up."

I let him pull me to the camp entrance and shove me inside. My harsh breaths sounded loud inside my mask, and I blinked rapidly to clear the blurriness from my eyes when we emerged back into the camp. I could see candlelight flickering in the diner, long shadows dancing as Anchor moved around in there.

Lilac's bony hand clamped on my shoulder and steered me toward it. "We can look for him in the morning," he said in a hard voice. "But you're not going anywhere tonight."

"He'll be gone in the morning," I shot back, hearing the edge of hysteria in my voice.

"Then he doesn't want us to look for him," Lilac said flatly, and I wanted to punch him.

Anchor was grinning at me tiredly from behind her mask when Lilac pushed me into the diner. "Ghost, this is *incredible*." She gestured at the open sheet spread out on the diner floor, weapons still haphazardly piled in the centre.

When I said nothing, she frowned a little and peered round us. "Where's Aury?"

"He's gone," I burst out, going hot all over with a wave of despair.

Aury was gone.

"Oh. Shit." Anchor's wide eyes darted between me and Lilac. "I thought Lilac said he was just—"

"He left," Lilac clarified.

“Oh.” Anchor stared at me with pity, and it made me want to scream. “I’m sorry, Ghost.”

I couldn’t deal with this. “We found these.” I gestured at the weapons. “That’s it. Sorry to wake you.” My voice was a flat monotone. “I need to sleep now,” I added, even though I was just going to try and slip back out of the camp when Lilac wasn’t looking. If I didn’t hurry, I wouldn’t be able to find him. I wouldn’t be able to catch up.

My chest heaved with a shuddering breath, and I tried hard not to start hyperventilating.

“I—Okay.” I could hear Anchor wanted to say more, but her tone was hesitant. “You can tell me what happened in the morning, but… was there any news at the Topeka camp?” she blurted, voice desperate. “About Cat?”

The lie slipped out of me shockingly easy. “The Topeka camp is gone. It was destroyed when we got there.”

Anchor and Lilac both went still. I heard Anchor suck in a sharp breath. “Wh-what?”

I nodded. “The perimeter was down. The building was gutted.” I shrugged one shoulder, staring at the floor. “Totally deserted.”

“Oh my god.” Anchor’s voice was shaky, but I couldn’t deal with her emotions right then. With anything.

I turned to leave, but Lilac’s hand on my shoulder stopped me. “There’s something you should know, Ghost.”

I exhaled. “What?” I didn’t think there was anything I cared about enough to warrant *needing to know* right this instant, when my insides already felt like they were dying. But I waited.

There was a long silence. When I reluctantly turned back to face Anchor, she was pale behind her mask.

“Ghost…” She stopped, and I heard her throat click as she swallowed. “It’s… Rig is gone. Not dead,” she clarified quickly when my breath whooshed out of me in an awful rush. “He went—he went with Mary.”

I struggled to process what she’d just said. “He… what?”

“He went with Mary and her… pets. He said he wanted to try and help free them, and she was leaving because Aury was gone, and…” Anchor shrugged helplessly. “It wasn’t like I could hold him hostage. It was his choice.”

I was trembling. I went hot all over, feeling like I was about to burst into flames. “You let him go with her,” I managed to bite out, voice low and

shaking with the tidal wave of emotions that I was struggling to control.

“It was his choice,” Anchor repeated. “I had no right to stop him.”

I exploded.

“Fuck you, Anchor,” I shouted, so loud that Lilac actually took a step back. “You let him leave? You let him leave on his own? What the *fuck* is wrong with you?”

Anchor looked utterly shocked at my outburst, probably because I'd never raised my voice to her before, ever. To anyone in the camp, except that one time when Cutter had been spouting nasty shit about Aury.

She recovered a moment later, eyes flashing defensively. “This isn’t a prison. I can’t force him to stay.”

“You could have tried to talk him out of it.” I swung accusing eyes at Lilac, then back to her. “Someone could have. But I bet you did fuck all, didn’t you? Just let him leave with that fucking psychopath. Fuck you.”

I turned to storm out and glared at Lilac, who met my eyes silently. He followed me out of the diner, infuriating me further. “Leave me the fuck alone.”

“No.”

My head throbbed with a sharp ache, and as I stomped toward the entrance, I had no idea what I was planning on doing. Was I going after Aury, or Rig?

“They left days ago,” Lilac said from behind me, keeping up with my furious strides. “You won’t catch up, Ghost.”

“Fuck you,” I repeated, my brain no longer allowing me to form more coherent sentences.

I wanted to shove him when Lilac clamped a hand on my shoulder and jerked me to a stop. He managed to turn me and propel me toward my room. “You need to rest. You’re exhausted. We can talk in the morning.”

“I don’t want to talk to you,” I snapped, trying to shove him away from me. He didn’t budge, a surprising amount of strength in his compact body.

“Fine.” Lilac produced my room key from his pocket—Rig must have given it to him before he left—and unlocked my door. “But I’m still going to sit out here. All night. You’re not leaving this room.”

And then he raised a booted foot, planted it on my ass, and shoved me forward into the room. I stumbled inside, everything dark and still and too quiet when the door shut behind me and I heard Lilac lock me inside. A

whimper left me as I stood there, panting with desperation, trembling and hot and sweating.

What had just happened? *How* had this all happened? Aury was gone. Rig was gone. Everything had collapsed around me in minutes, and Lilac expected me to just *fall asleep in my room*?

I eyed my bedroom window, just visible through the mostly pulled curtains, but before I could even take a step I heard Lilac's voice, muffled through the door. "Rig still hasn't fixed the latch on your window, so you won't be able to get out that way."

I gritted my teeth, resisting the urge to tell him to go fuck himself, and spun to pound my fist on the door. "Let me out," I shouted instead, hoarse with panic.

"No." Lilac's voice was calm. "Try and sleep, Ghost. Clear your head."

"I can't." I pounded again, then again, mortified when a weak sound left my throat. "Please, Lilac. I need to go find him."

I didn't even know who I was talking about. Both of them, maybe. But how was I supposed to do that? I'd never felt more useless than I did in that moment.

"I'm not letting you go out into the Wastes when you're this upset," Lilac told me through the door, a softness in his voice I'd never heard before. "Please try and sleep. There's nothing you can do."

I shuddered hard, wrapping my arms around myself and leaning my forehead against the door in my dark room.

I didn't sleep.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“Stay still.” For once, Lilac’s usually flat voice was coloured with annoyance as he tugged at my hand, splaying it out on the mattress in front of me. “I’m not doing this again.”

“I’m trying,” I snapped, wincing when his fingertips dug into my palm. “You’re too bony.”

“I’m not bony.” Lilac’s head bent low over my hand as he concentrated. “I’m toned.”

“Whatever,” I muttered, staring at the top of his dark head, my cheek squashed against my pillow.

“If you keep moping around like this, you’re going to end up as soft as a marshmallow,” Lilac said as he carefully painted my thumbnail bright pink. “Then what will happen if you need to run from a beastie.”

I sighed and rolled onto my back to stare up at the ceiling, extending my other hand when Lilac gestured for it. “Dunno. I’ll get caught, I guess. Bound to happen one day.”

Lilac arched a dark brow at me and yanked my hand closer to where he sat cross-legged on the floor beside the bed, just a touch harder than he needed to. “I know you’re a worrier, but I never pegged you for a defeatist.”

I just shrugged, which made Lilac tut with irritation when the movement caused him to accidentally paint the side of my pinky finger. I felt him shoot daggers at me, but he didn’t say anything as he bent his head low again.

He was trying to cheer me up. It wasn’t working, but I couldn’t decide if that was because I was incapable of being happy right now, or if Lilac’s slightly terrifying personality just wasn’t conducive to perking up a person’s mood. Still, he was trying. I wasn’t grateful, exactly, but it made me like him more than I already did.

It had been eight days since we’d gotten back to camp. Since Aury had left me, and I’d found out Rig was gone. For the first five of those days, Lilac had patiently gone searching in the Wastes with me for Aury. Never complaining when I made us stay out later than we should, until it was already dark by the time we were getting back to camp, and never voicing what I knew he was thinking.

Not until the end of the fifth day, when he stopped me just as we were about to head inside the container that led back into the camp.

“We would have found him by now, Ghost,” he’d said, with a hand on my shoulder. “If he’s still in the area, and he wants to be found, he's had many opportunities to make himself known.”

I hadn’t answered him. I hadn’t been able to. I’d just turned, walked into camp, gone into my room and climbed into bed. For the last three days, I’d sat on the camp wall alone, watching the horizon for any sign of big black wings, retreating back to my bed only when I got so tired I couldn’t hold my eyes open.

Lilac had forced me to come and relax for a while, and I reluctantly agreed only because he’d been looking after the girls, so I definitely owed him. It made me feel like a terrible chicken parent, but everything was a monumental effort. I just couldn’t bring myself to do anything at all except sit and watch, hoping he’d come back.

I finally understood Anchor’s unwavering refusal to believe Cat was dead. That determination to ignore the most obvious answer. The crushing hopelessness that left you unable to move forward, keeping you frozen in place.

Anchor had tried to come and see me, but I wouldn’t respond. Apollo had asked if he could come and check me over, just to make sure everything was okay with me physically, but I’d said no. Lilac was the only one I spoke to or let into my room, because he was mostly silent and the least annoying, except when he was trying to get me to eat. Daisy kept making my favourite foods, so I was forcing them down for her sake, but everything tasted like ash.

“Seriously, Ghost, you’re going to have to get back to normal at some point,” Lilac said dryly as he painted my nails. “I thought you wanted to go after Rig, anyway.”

I *did* want to go and start searching for Rig, but that was its own goliath. All we knew was that Mary’s place was *west*. There was a lot of west from here, and I wasn’t sure if Lilac would be willing to come with me on that wild goose chase that would take us far, far away from the camp. I’d most likely be going alone. I wasn’t sure if I was mentally prepared for that yet.

But mainly I was scared that if I left to look for Rig, maybe… maybe Aury would come back, and I’d miss him, and then he’d leave again. So I was stuck in limbo.

My vision blurred as I stared up the ceiling, eyes getting hot. I blinked quickly and turned to look at the top of Lilac's dark head again.

"Was everyone happy with the new weapons?" I asked to distract myself. I hadn't spoken to anyone since that first night, besides Lilac. I'd left my room to go out searching in the Wastes and gone straight back into it every night after we got back, only leaving to shower and use the bathroom in the dead of night when everyone else was asleep.

I was turning into a weird little hermit—the creep who lived in your block but you never saw, just heard in the small hours doing weird shit. We'd lived next door to one of those back in the city, and to this day I still had no idea what they looked like. I wondered if they were still there, and then I wondered if my own parents were even still there. Still alive. I had no idea.

"Ecstatic," Lilac said, and I knew he wasn't being sarcastic even though his inflectionless voice made it seem that way.

"Did Cutter get one?" I asked resentfully, because I was a petty bitch and I didn't want that asshole to have one of the weapons that Aury, the monster he openly despised, had carried back here for the camp.

Lilac carefully turned my hand to get to my thumbnail. "Cutter is currently staying in the room next to Apollo's."

I frowned at that, staring at Lilac's ponytail. The room next to Apollo's was kept empty to act as an infirmary when we needed it. "What happened to him?"

"Got injured while you were gone."

I almost rolled my eyes. "Yes. I figured. How?"

"Hand injury. He'll live." The unspoken *unfortunately* passed between us as Lilac lifted his head and his bright-green eyes met mine. Even though a simple hand injury wouldn't have landed Cutter in the infirmary for an extended period, I didn't ask what had really happened. I didn't care.

Lilac nodded at my hand. "Did I do a good job?"

I lifted both hands above my head and stared up at them, taking in the bright pink polish on my short, blunt nails. He'd done a perfect job, which didn't surprise me. Lilac's every move was precise. "Great. Thank you." Unfortunately, I couldn't stir up much enthusiasm.

Lilac's quiet exhale as he stood up made me think he realised it had been a futile effort. I felt like an ungrateful asshole, so I sat up, my head swimming from being horizontal for too long.

“Thanks, Lilac,” I repeated, examining them again. “They look really good.”

Lilac just grunted in response, watching me from beside the bed. “If I go and get something from Daisy, will you eat it?”

I flushed at the implication that I was incapable of looking after myself, but… it was kind of true at that moment. The realisation sent a tiny spark of determination through me. To get up and get back to normalcy. I couldn’t wallow forever. Aury was gone and he clearly wasn’t coming back.

The thought just made me want to curl back up under the covers.

I nodded and forced myself to smile up at Lilac, knowing I looked like shit. It had been weird as hell at first for him to see me without my mask. Only Aury and Rig had seen me without it for longer than I could remember. But, true to character, Lilac hadn’t even commented on it.

Before leaving, he grabbed my book from the nightstand and passed it to me. “Here. Do not smudge your nails. I’m not doing that again.”

I took the book from him and carefully opened it to my place. From the corner of my eye, I saw Lilac reach a hand into his pocket before leaning over to the nightstand again.

“I’ve left something for you on the nightstand, but it’s not a big deal and when I come back, I don’t want you to mention it.”

I frowned, looking up from my book. “What—”

But he had already slipped out of the room. I looked over at the nightstand and froze when I saw the little wooden figurine on it. With big wings. One damaged.

I tried to swallow around the lump in my throat as I dropped the book on my lap and reached out. I picked it up carefully, staring down at the likeness of Aury that Lilac had carved. The details were incredible—delicate and intricate, down to the little rough patch on the side of its face, just like Aury’s burn scars.

I sucked in a shuddering breath and ran my painted thumb down the damaged wing. Lilac had started this a while ago, then. He might pretend to be cold and unfeeling, but he wasn’t, deep down.

My vision blurred, and I knew Lilac would be back soon, so I carefully replaced the figurine on the nightstand and lay down, picking up my book. But when I opened it, I just stared blankly at the page. I couldn’t even enjoy reading anymore. I just wanted to hear Aury’s low voice reading the words to me.

I felt a momentary flash of anger at him. He'd just come into my life, into the camp, and made me fall in love with him, then fucked off even though I'd been *literally* begging him not to. It wasn't fair. Now everything looked shit and bleak and boring without him, and my best friend wasn't even here to make it better, and it felt like my heart was slowly dying in my chest.

The page swam in front of me, so I quickly blinked and looked up at the ceiling to stop the tears from falling. I needed to stop crying. Stop wallowing. For so long, I'd been so scared of Anchor deciding I was useless and kicking me out. Well, now I was giving her the reasons to actually do it.

Even that thought couldn't muster any kind of strong reaction from me, though. I was going to leave anyway, to find Rig. As long as I could get him back here safely, that was what mattered. Maybe I should still try the Great Lakes. Just on my own.

The door opened and Lilac stepped back into the room, carefully carrying a bowl of something. I hastily rubbed my wrist over my eyes and pretended I'd been reading. "What have we got?" I asked, trying to inject a bit of enthusiasm into my voice, seeing as he'd just gone and got my dinner for me—again.

"Noodle soup." Lilac carried the bowl over and set it on the nightstand with a fork and spoon. "Daisy opened a packet of noodles from the stores just for you." He set his hands on his hips and looked down at me with a blank face. "She told me to tell you that."

"Thanks, Lilac." I turned onto my side, still holding my book, and eyed the steam rising lazily from the bowl. It smelled good at least. "I'll let it cool a bit first. And…" I swallowed. "Thank you… Thank you for the—"

"Told you not to mention it," he interjected, so I nodded quickly and looked down.

When Lilac continued standing there, though, I glanced back up to eye him. "You don't have to stay in here to watch me eat. I promise I'll eat it."

"It's not that." Lilac glanced over at the door, then back at me. "Moth's here," he said. "He wants to come and see you. Shall I let him in?"

I groaned and rolled onto my back, letting my book fall to the side. "Moth's an asshole."

Lilac didn't say anything, so I looked over at him. "He is, though, isn't he?"

Lilac's brow twitched. "You're just still pissy because he left you with those beasties."

I shot up. "I could've *died*!"

"You weren't going to die."

I groaned again in frustration. "Ugh, you sound just like him." I cast about for something else. "Okay, well, he's still an ass. He has a sword. What kind of douchebag carries a sword? Right?"

Lilac was silent for a long moment. "I kind of like the sword," he admitted in a gruff voice.

I rolled my eyes and threw myself back onto my pillow, as if I didn't secretly agree that the sword was kind of cool. "You're as bad as he is. Whatever. Let him in if he wants." I rolled onto my side and pulled the covers back up to my chin.

"Eat," was all Lilac said in return. "I'll go and get him." Then he was gone.

I blinked at the bowl on my nightstand in the ensuing silence, telling myself to sit up and eat it, but my eyes kept drifting to the little carved figure instead. When there was a knock at my door, I tensed.

"Ghost?" Moth's voice sounded hesitant. "Lilac told me you said it was alright if I came to see you."

I considered staying silent so he'd go away, but in the end I couldn't. I grunted to let him know he could come in.

He did, pale eyes finding me immediately in bed, dark brows furrowing a little. As he clicked the door shut gently behind him, he glanced around my room, taking it all in—not that there was much to see—before looking at me again.

When I saw his eyes roam over my face, down my nose to my mouth, I flushed and barely resisted the urge to pull the covers up to my eyes like a child. I'd forgotten I wasn't wearing a mask. This was the first time Moth had ever seen my whole face, and it was a weird sensation. My mask was part of my armour. Without it, I felt woefully ill-prepared for any verbal sparring match I was about to have with him.

"Okay, first, I *really* don't want to argue with you." Moth walked over to the bed and, after hesitating, sank down to sit cross-legged beside it in the spot Lilac had previously occupied.

I eyed him, sensing an uneasy truce wavering in the air between us, if I was willing to take it. "Fine," I said at length.

Moth nodded once and cast almost desperate eyes around again, like he wanted to take everything in while he had the chance. I saw the moment he noticed the figurine on the nightstand, because he went very still.

He looked back at me. “What happened at the Topeka camp, Ghost?” he asked me, voice calm.

I jolted in shock, lifting my cheek off the pillow. That had been the last thing I’d expected him to say. “What do you mean?” I asked warily. “I told Anchor, when we got there—”

“I don’t believe you,” Moth said bluntly, but then his eyes met mine with a weird mixture of sympathy and apprehension. “It was the rycke, wasn’t it?”

I swallowed, throat bobbing. “No,” I lied. “When we got there—”

“I already told you I don’t believe you,” Moth interrupted, leaning forward, his pale eyes boring into mine. “I just came from there, Ghost. I went to see if they’d heard anything about Cat, because Anchor said you hadn’t checked there yet. I didn’t know you’d already been until I got here.” He continued watching me steadily. “I could smell the rycke all over that camp. His blood.”

I shivered. I sometimes forgot Moth wasn’t entirely human. “I…” I swallowed, dry throat clicking. “They threatened—”

“Did he turn into that… Did he change?” Moth asked me, voice hoarse.

I stared at him, momentarily paralysed with indecision. Moth wasn’t stupid. And he was half-monster. Of all people, he would perhaps be more sympathetic to Aury’s situation. He understood it more.

“Yes.” My voice was faint.

Moth’s face twitched, and for a second, his eyes tightened with something that looked like devastation. “He’s bonded to you, then.” He swallowed. “Did they try and hurt you?”

I nodded. “There was someone—They’d killed Wick and Vesta and taken over,” I said, rushing to explain. “He—the new leader—was threatening this camp. And then one of them hit me, and Aury…” I trailed off, because there wasn’t really any other way to spin it.

“He killed everyone and destroyed everything in sight. Except you.”

I nodded again, feeling as though I should apologise. My eyes got hot. “I didn’t know—”

“I’m not blaming you, Ghost.” Moth exhaled and rested a tattooed hand on the mattress between us. “It’s not your fault.”

“You tried to warn me, though.” My voice shook, and to my mortification, a tear slipped out and ticked my nose. “I didn’t believe you.”

Moth’s brows twitched together in a pained frown, and for a second I thought he was going to reach forward and touch me. I stiffened, not wanting it. Not wanting *anyone* to touch me except Aury.

“That still doesn’t make it your fault.” Moth’s long, tattooed fingers worried the sheet on the bed. “Aury is the one who did it.”

“He said he couldn’t control it,” I rasped.

Moth shook his head, face twisting for a split second with bitterness before he controlled it. “When the rycke’s mate is in danger, they… tend to fly off the handle. From what I’ve heard, anyway.” He looked up at me with a hesitant expression. “So… where is he? Lilac mentioned he… wasn’t here.”

I bit down hard on the inside of my cheek. “He left. We were going to leave together, because I know he can’t stay here when he… when that could happen again. But then he left without me.” My eyes filled up again. “He said I’d be safest here, so he just *left me*.”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm down. “And then Anchor told me she’d let Rig leave with that fucking psychopath, Mary, and I just…” I exhaled, then pursed my lips. “It’s been a shitty week.”

Moth was gazing at me with sympathy in his eyes, and I hated it. “I’m sorry, Ghost. I know we…” He flushed, looking down at his fingers as they made pleats in the sheet. “I know our… friendship deteriorated after that scouting trip. But I swear I didn’t leave you to fight off those beasties alone on purpose.” He looked back up at me, pale eyes intense. “I wouldn’t have done that.”

I watched him. “Why did you, then?”

Moth shook his head, pierced lips pursing with frustration. “It’s hard to explain. But I just… please believe me. I never would’ve intentionally put you in danger. And I’m sorry that I did.”

I gawked at him for a few seconds, part of me unable to believe the fact that cocky, swaggering Moth had just *apologised* to me. “I… Okay,” I said dumbly.

He gave me a tiny smile, relief in his eyes, but it fell again just as fast. He leaned forward to rest his chin on the edge of the mattress, tattooed fingers splaying out on the bed, like he wanted to reach for me but stopped himself. I stared vacantly at the weird, alien marks across the back of his

hand and down his fingers. I'd always wondered what they meant, but never asked.

"How can I make you feel better?" Moth was watching me.

"You can't." I exhaled and rolled onto my back to stare up at the ceiling. I could feel Moth's eyes on the side of my face. "I know I'm being a total baby. I know I need to get up and stop moping." I paused, watching a tiny spider spin her web in the corner of my ceiling. "I need to go look for Rig."

"I'll go with you," Moth said quickly, and I glanced over at him with raised brows. He nodded. "I can help you look for him. I've heard things about Collector Mary. I know people who've seen her. I've been asking around."

It was tempting. Moth could be helpful. But my insides balked at the idea. It felt almost… disloyal to Aury. Like I was trying to replace him.

I shook my head. "You don't have to do that, Moth."

"I want to," he said. "And I don't mean… I don't have any expectations." His voice was gruff with embarrassment. "I'm not stupid. If the rycke bonded to you, then I know what that means."

I bit down hard on my lower lip, staring at the ceiling and trying not to think of Aury in bed beside me, curled around me while I slept. Kissing across my shoulders when I woke up. Reading to me in his soft voice until I fell sleep.

When I didn't say anything, Moth continued hesitantly. "Do you… love him?" he asked in a quiet voice.

I swallowed convulsively and nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

Moth frowned. "I'm sorry, Ghost. But… if the reason he left was because he was worried he'd hurt you when he… changes, then…" He exhaled, sounding reluctant to admit it. "He won't. It's almost like he's physically incapable of hurting you. He's bonded to you. He'd sooner die than hurt you."

I shook my head. "That wasn't his worry. Or mine. It was…"—I gestured toward the door—"the rest of the camp. What if something happens and he just snaps and kills everyone?" I looked over at him. "You saw the Topeka camp, Moth."

"Yeah." Moth's voice was hoarse. "I mean, I guess. You're the only person alive who he would never, ever hurt, but… I think he'd be okay here. I'm sure he cares about some of the others. Rig. Anchor. If he can try and get better control over the change, it could be okay. The main thing is

making sure no one in the camp threatens your life. If that happens, all bets are off."

My mind immediately went to Cutter. "I can't guarantee I'll never get hurt in camp," I said dully.

"I suppose not."

We fell silent, and after a minute Moth picked up my bowl. "You need to eat your dinner before it gets cold."

I sighed and struggled into a sitting position, leaning against the headboard. Moth handed me the bowl and I started to eat, barely tasting it.

He watched me for a few moments, then cleared his throat. "So, it wasn't the half-monster thing, then."

I glanced over at him with my mouth full. "Huh?"

Moth's normally pale face was pink. "Before, when we were… getting close and then it just kind of stopped. I wondered if maybe it was…" He shrugged, looking down and picking at the edge of the bedframe. "If it was the half-monster thing. That put you off. But obviously it wasn't."

I stared at him in disbelief, holding my spoon. "No, it wasn't the half-monster thing, you ass! It was the leaving me surrounded by a pack of beasties thing!"

Moth flushed defensively. "I just told you that wasn't on purpose!"

"How was I meant to know that before you told me?" I shovelled another mouthful of soup into my mouth.

Moth sighed. "Well, it doesn't matter now, anyway."

He sounded so sad for a moment that I felt guilty over how vehement I'd been about my dislike for him since that scouting trip.

I looked down into my half-full bowl. I was done, so I held it out to him. "Here, you can finish this." My voice was gruff, because I didn't want him to comment on the peace-offering—just accept it and move on.

After a long pause, he did, reaching out and taking it. "Thanks."

I settled back against the headboard as he twirled some noodles onto the fork, looking down at the bowl in his lap. I toyed with the corner of my book, still laying beside me on the bed, and stared at it as I mumbled, "Thanks. For wanting to make me feel better."

Moth paused from eating. "I was… That's okay." He sounded guarded, and I decided I didn't want him to voice whatever he was thinking. I was glad we'd come to a truce. Deep down, I did like Moth. I didn't want anything else to make it weird.

“So what were you going to do?” he asked as he set the empty bowl on the nightstand.

“Huh?” I glanced over at him.

“You said you were going to leave together. What was your plan?”

I looked down at my fidgeting hands, feeling embarrassed because it all seemed so childishly hopeful now. That it could have worked. “We were going to head east, toward the Great Lakes. Away from Mary. We only came back first because we found some weapons that we wanted to give to the camp.” When, in all likelihood, Aury had been planning on leaving me here the whole time.

“So you were willing to leave the camp for him?” Moth asked quietly.

I nodded, then shrugged. “And now him leaving to keep me safe feels fucking pointless because I’m going out there anyway. To look for Rig.” I gritted my teeth with frustration. “He told me ryckes were martyrs. Fucking Aury.” I blinked hard.

It was a physical ache in my chest. I wanted him there with me so badly it hurt. My room was so sad and small and empty without him and his giant wings filling up half the space. Without his voice reading to me, or his skin touching mine.

Moth cleared his throat and inched his hand across the mattress to drag my book closer. “What’s your book about?” he asked, clearly trying to distract me.

I rolled my head over the headboard to look at him. “You can’t tell from the title?” It was a book about living conditions of the working class in Victorian London. Nothing distracted you from heartache quite like detailed descriptions of what it was like to die from typhoid in nineteenth century poverty.

Moth flushed, then rolled his eyes as he nudged the book back toward me. “I was just trying to take an interest.” He got to his feet, picking up the bowl from the nightstand. “I might stay around camp for a while, or at least in the area, so… maybe I’ll see you tomorrow.” He hesitated. “I’m sorry you’re hurting, Ghost.”

I looked up at him and could see the intense longing in Moth’s eyes before he shielded it by looking away. For a moment, I wondered what would have happened if he’d never disappeared on me that day. We’d already been flirting. We probably would have had sex at the very least, but more likely become a couple. He would have moved in here, to the camp,

permanently. He would have gone with me that day to the base and been there when I found Aury.

He would have told me Aury was dangerous, and we probably would have just left him, or at most freed him from his chains but left him there to fend for himself. And I would've never seen him again.

I shuddered hard at the thought, wrapping my arms around myself. "Thanks, Moth," I croaked, voice flat. "Maybe see you tomorrow."

After he left, I lay back down, curled up on my side, and closed my eyes.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

I'd thought Moth's visit might make me start getting back to normal. That I'd get up and, instead of sitting on the camp wall staring at the horizon like a mindless zombie, I'd make myself useful around the camp again. Maybe even go out scavenging for stuff before I told Anchor I'd be leaving to find Rig.

Instead, I didn't even get out of bed the following morning. I slept until my head hurt, then dragged myself out of bed around noon to use the bathroom and shower for the first time in days. When I got back to my room, Lilac had left a bowl of stew on the table, so I sat down to eat it, the silence in my room broken occasionally by faint clucks from the girls outside.

The sound made my chest hurt. I missed them, which was kind of stupid but… they were more than just laying hens to me. To Aury, as well. He'd loved them. Maybe there was kinship there, although I wasn't sure if he'd appreciate being grouped in with chickens. Or maybe it was because they hadn't been afraid of him, and that was so rare—they'd been more affectionate with him than anyone else.

When I finished eating, I dragged my chair over beneath the window and pushed back one of my curtains. As I shoved the window open as far as it would go, I wondered if I should just try and fix the damn latch myself. Rig wasn't here to fix things anymore.

My eyes prickled at the thought, so I quickly stuck my head out of the gap to distract myself. "Hi, ladies."

None of them paid any attention to me whatsoever, but it made me feel better to see them, aimlessly wandering around the yard as the sun set.

I couldn't open the window any further, and the bottom edge was pressing against my throat uncomfortably, so I pulled my head back in and rested my chin on folded arms against the windowsill, watching Trixie give herself a dust bath while Bianca squawked angrily at Pearl, who'd gotten too close.

I zoned out until a knock at the door made me jump. I made a grunting sound to let Lilac know he could come in, but it was Moth's voice that sounded from behind me. "Ghost."

I looked over my shoulder at him. “Oh. Hey.”

I stood up and dragged the chair back to the table as Moth glanced back at Lilac, who was hovering outside the door, before taking a step inside and closing the door behind him.

“Um… I did something,” he said, voice stilted.

I made a face at him. “What.”

Moth’s face did something complicated, flitting from uncertainty to determination to resignation. He worried the ring going through the centre of his lower lip before finally speaking. “I… went and found him for you.”

I stared at him, unable to move, even as my heart started pounding hard in my chest. “What?”

“I went and found the rycke for you. Aury. He’s here.”

I swallowed hard. “He’s here?”

Moth nodded, watching me closely. “He’s outside. Lilac’s with him.” Moth’s throat bobbed, and he took a few steps closer. “Ghost, if you don’t want to see him—”

“I do,” I burst out, wondering if I should be coy about it, but… fuck it. “Okay,” I said, mainly to myself, exhaling a long breath. “Okay.”

I looked back up at Moth, confused. “How did you find him? Lilac and I looked everywhere, for days.”

Moth shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “I knew he wouldn’t have gone far, because he would want to watch over you. So I just walked around until I got the sudden urge to flee in terror, which meant he was nearby.”

I stared at him. “Does he really… trigger that reaction in you?” I asked. I couldn’t imagine it. At least, not when Aury was just Aury. When he changed, that was… different.

Moth nodded; face entirely serious. “In all monsters. Yeah.” He watched me for a moment longer. “So… you want to see him?”

I nodded, resisting the urge to smooth down my hair, which was ridiculous. At least I’d put clean clothes on. Anxiety rose inside me like a storm, the first true emotion I’d had in days, and it made me want to chew on my thumbnail. I didn’t, mainly because if I messed up the manicure Lilac had given me, I was pretty sure he might actually kill me.

I was vibrating with nerves when Moth turned toward the door.

“Wait,” I blurted, and Moth turned around again. “Did you tell anyone?” I asked him, unable to keep the edge of desperation out of my tone. “About what… Aury did? The Topeka camp?”

Moth shook his head, lips pulling down at the corners. “No one. I promise.”

My eyes got hot. “Moth… thank you.” I stepped forward to hug him, but he stumbled back and put his hands up, making me freeze and feel like a complete fool.

“Sorry, I just… The rycke’s right outside.” He tilted his head toward the door and gave me a small, sheepish smile. “You’re his mate, so… I’d rather not risk it.”

“Oh.” I dropped my arms, cheeks getting hot. “Okay. Sorry.”

“I just… I hope whatever happens makes you happy, Ghost,” Moth said, and I forced myself to give him a smile, but it was distracted because I was jittery with nerves. I didn’t want to be rude when Moth had done something so kind and selfless.

My breath caught when he opened the door and I saw Aury standing there next to Lilac, anxiously rubbing long fingers up and down his arms. Like he had all those weeks ago, when he’d knocked on my door and asked to come in, and everything had changed.

I was frozen to the spot as we stared at each other, Aury’s black eyes big and mournful. He took a single step closer. “Can I come in?”

I managed to nod, only vaguely aware of Moth plastering himself against the wall beside the door to avoid Aury’s wings touching him. He blinked in slight alarm when Aury looked directly at him after stepping into the room.

“Thank you,” Aury said, and Moth made a little sound in response.

When Aury looked back at me, my breath shuddered out of me. Half of it was my body’s sheer relief at having him near again, his cold-air scent enveloping me. The other half was a confusing blend of want and hurt and anger.

Anger won. I took a step toward him, hands balled into tight fists by my sides. “You are such an ass, Aury.”

Moth was staring at me from behind Aury’s back with a look of horror. Without saying a word, Lilac reached into the room, his face carefully expressionless, and grabbed Moth’s arm to tug him out. He shut the door behind them, leaving us in tense silence.

Aury fidgeted. “I just wanted you to be safe—”

“You abandoned me!” I flushed as soon as the words burst out of me. Maybe that had been a tad melodramatic.

He gave me a patient look. “I left you where you’d be safe, Gage, and you know why I can’t stay here.”

“Yeah, but we were going to leave *together*!” I clenched my jaw to stop my chin from trembling.

Aury shook his head, and I saw his eyes flicker down to my mouth with longing. “You’re safe here. It’s too dangerous out there. You don’t want to live out there.”

“Even with you? With what you can become? That’s bullshit.” I shook my head, anger rising again. “I know the Wastes, Aury. I’m used to them. I can survive out there on my own—I’ve been doing it for years. But with *you*, I know I’d be fine. I’d be safe. *You’d* keep me safe.”

“You really want to live out there with me? With what I… become?” Aury’s eyes were achingly vulnerable.

“I love you.” I stared up at him, determined to make him see. “I know you’re not human, Aury. It doesn’t make me love you less.”

“But it’s not just that, Gage.” Aury looked agonised. “This is your home. You have friends here. I can’t take you away from that.”

I felt a pang at his words, because there was a part of me that desperately didn’t want to leave the camp, despite its bad points. He was right. It was my home.

I would leave, though. For him, I would.

“I don’t want to be apart from you, Aury,” I said, voice ragged with desperation. “I made that clear. We *talked* about what we were going to do.” My chin trembled, no matter how much I tried to stop it. “And then you just left without me.”

“I’m sorry.” Aury’s eyes were anguished as he took a halting step forward, his wings shivering. “I would give anything to stay with you, Gage. Anything. But I can’t take you from your home and make you live out there.” He gestured toward the window. “And we both know why I can’t stay here. I could hurt someone.”

Frustrated anger made me tremble. “Well, I’m not even staying here,” I snapped, an ugly part of me wanting to hurt him like he’d hurt me. “I’m leaving to look for Rig, so I’ll still be out there—”

“What?” Aury stared at me, a panicked look on his face. “Leaving? Look for Rig? What do you mean?”

My jaw ticked. “He’s gone. Anchor let him leave with Mary.”

Aury stared at me. “Oh, no.”

“Yeah. So I’m going out there anyway. Just on my own now.” I couldn’t stop the bitterness creeping into my voice.

Aury rushed forward and took my hands, squeezing tight. “Don’t. I’ll go—Let me go and find him.” His voice was desperate. “You stay here.”

My hands trembled in his grip. I couldn’t decide whether I wanted to pull him closer or rip free from his hold. “No. I’m going.”

“Gage, please.” Aury let go of my hands to reach up and cup my face. “I’ll find him and bring him back, just stay here—”

“*No*.” I stepped back, my heart hurting when his hands fell to his sides and his head twitched.

“Then let me come with you,” he said, his tone pleading. “To protect you. Please.”

I shook my head. “You can’t. If Mary gets to you—”

“I’m not letting you go out on your own. And I won’t let her get me.” Aury looked down at me, and his usually soft black eyes were harder. More determined. Similar to how he’d looked after he’d killed those soldiers for pointing their guns at me. “I’ll never let her or her aytorin hurt you, Gage. Or Rig.”

“I know,” I said, voice urgent with the need to make him see. “I *know* you’ll never let anything hurt me, which is why I’d be fine living out in the Wastes with you, Aury. We’d be fine.”

Aury stared at me, expression wavering with longing. A tiny ember of hope sparked in my chest at the sight. Then it flared when I remembered Moth’s words from before.

“What about if you could control your change?” I asked. “Then we could… maybe we could stay. After we found Rig, we could stay here.” I couldn’t hide the fragile hope that bloomed.

Aury looked pained. “It’s too much of a risk, Gage,” he said. “There’s no guarantee I can… control it fully.”

“I think you can learn to,” I said with more confidence than I truthfully felt. “You did after those soldiers. I could tell. You calmed yourself down.”

“Yes, but…” Aury shook his head, and then it twitched hard. “There’s still no guarantee.”

“You’re not violent by nature, Aury. It’s not like it’s your first instinct.”

He gave me a sad smile. “I think it is, though. Deep down. I always thought my ancestors’ memories were of… of what my kind was like

before. Long ago. Not anymore. But it looks like it's what I'm destined to be like, too."

"No." My voice was ragged as I stepped closer to him again and fisted his shirt. "It's not. You're not. You can control it, Aury. I'm asking if you're willing to try and learn to control it. To at least try. For me."

Aury's brows pinched. "Gage, I would do *anything* for you," he told me. My chest ached. I clenched my fist tighter, scrunching the fabric of his shirt. "But the thought of staying here worries me so much. I don't want to accidentally hurt anyone."

"We have time," I urged. "We'll go out and look for Rig, and you'll have a chance to practise controlling it."

Aury didn't look convinced. "Gage…"

"While we're out there, we can work out if it's safe for us to stay here," I pressed on, ignoring him. "And if it's not, then we leave here *together* after dropping Rig off. Yes?"

Aury parted his lips to speak, but I got there first. "We *both* get a say in this, Aury. Not just you. If I want to leave the camp, I can."

After a long, agonising pause, he finally nodded, but I could see the worry still in his eyes, even as it mixed with a tiny ray of hope. "I just… want what's best for you," he said, voice soft. "And I don't think that's me."

My resolve crumbled entirely. "You are," I told him, then leaned up to kiss him. Aury made a soft noise against my mouth as I dug my fingertips into his chest, needing to anchor him to me. "Please, Aury," I said against his lips, my voice shaking. "Please don't leave without me again."

He made an anguished sound. "I'm sorry." He kissed me. Then again. "I thought it was for the best, even though it was so painful."

"You told me yourself ryckes are martyrs by nature," I said as we finally parted.

He huffed with amusement before leaning down to kiss me again, seeming as unable to stop as I was. I felt him smile against my mouth, and I sagged into his chest when his forked tongue pushed inside a moment later.

"I'm so glad you came back," I mumbled against his mouth between kisses. "Can't believe I'm going to owe Moth for the rest of my life."

Aury nodded, breaking the kiss to drop another on my cheek. "He told me how sad you were." His breath shuddered out of him, and he nuzzled my cheek. "I hated the thought of it. But… I came back mainly for the girls."

I stilled, my brain taking a few seconds to process what he'd said. By the time I gave him a weak shove, he was already snuffling with laughter.

"Real nice, dork. Well, don't let me keep you from them then," I said with mock annoyance, stepping back and gesturing at the window, where we could see the hens pecking about.

Before I could get very far, Aury's wings were swooping around and folding me back up against his chest, holding me there tightly as his arms looped around my back and he grinned down at me.

I rolled my eyes. "Alright, you have a new party trick, but you can't just __"

He kissed me, successfully shutting me up.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

As I got dressed in full raider gear a while later, I couldn't help but notice how much Aury's wings moved. They fluttered and twitched, like they were eager to stretch out, but he was refraining because he didn't want to knock over any of my meagre belongings.

"I've got a shift keeping watch," I told Aury as I fixed my mask over my mouth. "Want to sit with me? Then after, we can go and tell Anchor we're leaving to look for Rig."

He nodded. "You should eat, though." He stepped closer and smoothed a hand over the top of my head. "You look pale."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm fine." I felt full of energy now he was back, like my body had been storing it all up for his return.

"I'll go and get you something and meet you on the wall," Aury told me.

"You don't have to—"

"I want to," he interrupted, then shrugged a little. "I want to say hello to Bo and Daisy too. I like them," he added, voice a tiny bit shy, which made me want to tug my mask back off and kiss him senseless.

I refrained—barely. "Okay. They'll be happy to see you. Daisy will try and feed you." I smiled up at him, and he grinned back.

"Then I'll just bring you two portions, and you can eat mine."

When we left the room, Lilac was hovering outside but Moth was nowhere to be seen. "Everything alright?" Lilac asked, bright-green eyes cutting between us.

I nodded and Aury spoke. "I'm going to get Ghost some food and take it up to him on the wall."

Lilac nodded once. "I'll come with you."

Aury looked down at me. "See you up there," he said, before taking off with Lilac. I wondered if Lilac wanted to keep an eye on him, but maybe I was just being paranoid. It wasn't like Lilac knew what had happened at the Topeka camp. Unless Moth had told him. But Moth had sworn he wouldn't say anything and, weirdly, I believed him.

I headed for the containers to make my way up through them to the top hatch. When I emerged on top of the wall, my eyes immediately fixed on the figure sitting on the edge, head bowed.

It was Cutter.

He turned at the sound of the hatch opening, and when he saw it was me, he glared over his mask. “Ghost.”

I swallowed, climbing up and closing the hatch. “Hey.”

He got up, his movements clumsy. I realised why when he turned to face me and I saw the white bandage covering the stump where his left hand used to be. It was just… gone.

I gawked. “What happened?”

Cutter gave me a sneering grimace, clearly in pain as he clutched his arm with his one remaining hand. “Mary’s little pet.”

“Jesus.” I thought of that creepy little thing, with its pointed head and burgundy skin. The excited rattling sound it made.

God, Rig was with that thing right now. What if it had hurt him? My heart gave a mighty lurch of fear in my chest. I had to go and find him.

“It… It ate your hand?” I heard myself asking, morbid curiosity blending with horror.

“It tried to.” Cutter’s voice was unspeakably bitter. “Apollo had to cut off what was left.”

My throat bobbed. “What… what happened?”

Cutter sneered. “It climbed up the wall when I was on watch. Probably thought it could get into the camp from above.”

The thought was horrifying, and I’d never been more grateful for the chicken wire roof Rig had cobbled together for us.

“I went to grab it and it did *this*.” He waved his stump again.

“I…” I swallowed and shook my head. “I’m sorry.” I glanced at the hatch, then frowned and blurted out before I could stop myself, “How did you get up here?”

Cutter huffed out an angry breath like a bull, eyes flashing. “Why, because I’m a useless fucking invalid now?” He gestured with his good arm toward the other end of the wall, where a raider was standing. “Keen helped me up, if you must know.”

“Sorry,” I muttered, taking a step back. “Didn’t mean to upset you.”

I turned and quickly started walking along the wall before he could fire back, but then I heard the dull thud of his boots against metal as he followed me, and my back tensed.

“You brought that thing back with you,” Cutter spat.

My shoulders hunched up with tension. “He’s not a thing. He’s a person.”

“It’s a *fucking. Monster*.”

The pure loathing in Cutter’s tone made me spin around, wary. He was standing there with his one hand clenched, but then he winced and held his left forearm, as though the stump at the end of it was throbbing from the rage-filled blood pumping too hard round his veins.

He lifted the stump. “Look what monsters *do*, Ghost.”

I stared at him. “Aury didn’t do that.”

“They’re all the same! They’re all capable of it! They’re no better than *animals*. And you’re *fucking one*, you sick freak.” He took a step closer to me, eyes glowing as his hate made him erratic. “You brought one into this camp. You attracted the rest of them. And look what happened to me.” He raised his stump again. “I’m *crippled* because of you.”

He took another step closer, and I backed up, wary.

“We’d just got rid of the rest of them, and then *you* had to come back with that thing.” His eyes flashed with hate. “Why did you have to come back at all, huh?”

I sucked in a breath at his words. I knew Cutter hated monsters, and I knew he’d never been overly fond of me, but he’d never been so blatant in wishing something bad would happen to me out in the Wastes before. It was a horrible feeling, one that made me want to wrap my arms around myself and get away from him. But I was stuck up here with him on the wall, so the most I could do was take a step back.

It didn’t stop him, though. He advanced, like a wolf slowly cornering its prey. “If you love monsters so much, why don’t you just fuck off and live out there with the rest of them?” His voice was an insidious hiss.

I was going to, you prick, I wanted to yell at him, but my throat had closed up, and the most I could do was shake my head.

“Raider camps are for *humans*,” he grated. “For humans to get *away* from monsters. But you think you’re so fucking important that you can bring one in here, huh? You think because you go out scavenging for us that you’re *better* than the rest of us? Because that’s right.” He let out a rough, grating laugh. “*I’m* the one that’s not pulling my weight, aren’t I?”

His face was splotchy with anger and pain as he took another step closer to me. “How am I meant to *pull my weight* now, huh, Ghost? With one fucking hand?” He waved the stump wildly, and my eyes tracked it. “And

it’s not even like I can ask Rig to make me a replacement. He’s gone. The most useful person in this camp, and *you* drove him away.”

“I didn’t—How was that my—” I was stammering, brain racing too fast to defend myself, my heart hammering.

“Ghost?” Lilac appeared from the hatch, and my heart lurched when the top of Aury’s wings appeared after him.

Cutter didn’t seem to hear him, too consumed by his irrational hate. “You brought those freaks here, and he left with them.” He pointed down into the camp with his good hand. “And now you’ve brought that one back with you and it’s going to kill us all. Mark my words.”

But Aury wasn’t down in the camp, where he was pointing. He was standing beside Lilac at the hatch, carefully holding a bowl of something that steamed in the cool air. I saw his eyes flash with that internal glow as he witnessed Cutter shouting at me aggressively.

Fuck.

“Cutter, Aury isn’t going to hurt anyone.” I kept my voice as calm as I could, but it still shook wildly. “I’m sorry that Mary’s pet hurt you. But you can still—”

“Fuck you, Ghost.” Cutter lurched forward a step, and I saw Lilac start walking quickly toward us. Aury moved with a far more predatory gait, eyes flashing again. His wings snapped open, the sound loud enough to echo down into the camp.

Shit, he was going to change and slaughter the whole camp. My breathing sped up, and I took a step back as Cutter advanced. “Cutter, this isn’t—”

“This is *your fault*.” Cutter reached me and shoved me hard, and I heard Aury make a low, inhuman sound as I stumbled back.

And then the heel of my boot was dipping, hitting nothing, and I realised with horror that the edge of the wall was under my foot. Momentum was still tipping me back.

“No—” I heard Aury cry, followed by the crash of the bowl that had been in his hands shattering against the metal. I choked on a breath as my arms pinwheeled. In the moment before I fell, I saw Lilac’s eyes get wide as he started sprinting, and Aury’s face crumple with devastation.

I fruitlessly tried to reach and grab for the wall edge, but my arms were too far away, and I was falling too fast. The air rushed past me, and I knew I was going to hit the ground frighteningly soon, but I couldn’t do more than

stare up as Lilac's head appeared over the edge of the wall, his eyes strangely intense with horror, and I thought I heard him shout, but the wind was too loud—

Something rushed past me, big and dark, and then impact against my back made all the breath leave my body in a rush, so fast my lungs couldn't reinflate for agonisingly long moments. At first I was convinced I'd hit the ground. But then arms tightened around me, and I realised the pounding in my ears was Aury's wings as he lowered us to the ground.

"Gage." His voice was anguished in my ear as his arms held me painfully tight, but I could hear the distortion in it already. My heart was hammering in my chest, so hard I thought I was going to have a heart attack.

Aury lowered me to my feet when we reached the ground, achingly gentle. My legs shook so wildly that I wasn't sure they'd be able to hold my weight at first, but then they stiffened with terror when I looked up and saw the change happening in Aury.

His face was twisting, mouth getting horrifyingly wide, elongating jaw beginning to force its way out. His fingernails lengthened into thick talons. His body swelled, back curving and hunching. The barbs along his spine grew alongside his wings.

My lungs finally allowed me to suck in a painful, trembling breath. "N-n-no—" I tried to say, but Aury's head had already swung up to the top of the wall, and I saw his huge, sunken eyes glow with that internal rage when they fixed on Lilac and Cutter, staring down at us. Lilac had Cutter's good arm trapped behind him, but even he looked too shocked at the sight of Aury to do more than that.

Aury's body was still growing, his wings still stretching out, when he pierced the shipping container in front of him with his thick talons, the metal shaking and screeching. He started to scale up the side of the wall with frightening speed.

"Aury, no," I shouted, lunging forward and grabbed at his ankle, hanging on for dear life.

I heard him snort, then grunt, that monstrous head swinging down to stare at me. I could see the irritation in his grotesque face, but he lowered himself back onto the ground, taking care not to hurt me, and turned to crouch down. I flinched only a little when that protruding jaw nuzzled the side of my face. At least it wasn't dripping with blood this time.

“Calm down, Aury,” I said in the most soothing voice I could manage, which was still jerky with fear. “Please. For me. You don’t want to hurt Lilac. Or Anchor. Or anyone else. I’m fine. See?”

I took hold of a talon, both my hands wrapping round it, and ignored the stab of fear in my chest when I brought it to my shoulder. “You saved me.” I smiled up at him, knowing he’d be able to see it in my eyes despite the mask. “I’m fine.”

Aury stroked my shoulder and down my arm with his deadly talon, impossibly gentle. His huge eyes softened, became unfocused. He grunted once, pushing his maw against my hair again. His enormous wings shivered and gave a mighty flap. When I saw his body start to shrink, I exhaled in sheer relief.

It didn’t take long for Aury to change back, and the moment he did he buried his face in my neck, trembling only a little. “Are you alright?” he asked me, voice soft but a pitch lower than normal. Frantic hands ran over me as his wings encased us.

I nodded. “I’m fine,” I rasped, pulling down my mask so I could kiss his cheek. I wished I could wrap my arms round his neck, but his barbs would have cut me. I rested my palms on his bare chest instead, feeling the thrum of his life seed in there beneath his skin. “We need to get you some clothes.”

Aury made a little snuffling sound, not quite a laugh, then heaved a huge trembling breath. “I could have killed everyone. Lilac, Anchor—”

“But you didn’t.” I leaned back and took his face in my hands, forcing him to look down at me. “You didn’t, Aury. You got control of yourself.” I went up on tiptoes to kiss him.

His mouth trembled against mine, but he kissed me back. When our lips parted, I smiled up at him. “I’m so proud of you. And you saved me.” I couldn’t help but kiss him again, hard. “You wouldn’t have been able to do that if you’d never changed. Your wing would still be broken.”

Aury gave a tiny nod, but he still looked uncertain. Scared, like he didn’t know what was going to happen when we got back into camp. “If Cutter tries to hurt you again—”

“He won’t get the chance. Lilac’s got him. And I don’t… I don’t think he actually meant to push me off. I think he was just angry.”

Aury’s eyes flared again, the glow sparking, so I quickly changed the subject. “Let’s go inside and get you some clothes.” I reached down and

patted his bare ass. “I don’t want anyone else getting to stare at this.”

Aury gave me a weak smile, but he let me pull him around the edge of the camp, sticking close to the wall so any raiders peering over the edge wouldn’t be able to see as much. When we reached the entrance, I turned to face him as I pulled up my mask. “Wait here for one second. I’ll run in and grab you something.”

He nodded and wrapped his arms around himself, running long fingers anxiously up and down his arms. I hurried into the camp and slipped around the edge of the motel building, hearing the girls rustling about in the yard. I could see Lilac shoving Cutter into the diner. I managed to get into my room unseen—my speciality.

After grabbing a shirt and pants, I realised Aury’s old coat was still draped over the back of one of the chairs at the table, so I grabbed that too. When I sidled back out of my room, I could see Anchor through the diner window, staring at Lilac with wide eyes while he calmly spoke. His hand was still clamped around Cutter’s good arm. Moth was in there too, leaning against the far wall, and his face was grim.

I reached Aury, who was trembling slightly as he waited by the camp entrance, and helped him hurriedly dress. The shirt was too tight across his wide shoulders, and the pants were too short, but it didn’t matter. I helped him shrug on his old coat, then took his hand so we could walk into camp together.

When we emerged from the container, I saw Anchor, Moth and Lilac all turn to look at us, attracted by the obtrusive black of Aury’s wings. Anchor strode to the door, shoved it open and beckoned us over.

My stomach cramped with nerves as we headed toward the diner. Now that they knew what Aury could change into, would they try and kill him? Or would they just let us leave? Lilac had killed many monsters. That part wouldn’t bother him. I just had to hope he cared enough about Aury to not want to do it.

Cutter was grey when we stepped into the diner, clutching the clean white bandages on his stump. “Why is it back in the camp?” he roared, eyes wild as they swung between us and Lilac. “You saw what it just turned into,” he shouted at Lilac. “You *saw it*.”

I could feel Moth’s eyes boring into me, but I couldn’t look at him. My heart pounded.

“What’s he talking about?” Anchor asked, voice urgent as her bushy brows furrowed. She stared at Aury warily.

Lilac gave a tiny shrug, and fragile hope bloomed in my chest.

“No idea.” His voice was emotionless as always. “Aury flew down to save Ghost before he hit the ground.” His green eyes cut to Cutter. “Because *Cutter* pushed him off the wall.”

“I didn’t mean to push him off,” Cutter shouted. “And he’s fucking lying. He’s *lying*! It turned into a… a huge monster.” He shuddered hard, trying to scramble away from Aury. “Its teeth were—”

“You’re acting hysterical,” Lilac said flatly. “Maybe you’re still delirious from blood loss. I didn’t see Aury change into anything. Get a grip, Cutter, and stop trying to distract us from what you did. What we all *witnessed* you do.”

Exhilarating relief pounded through me, momentarily weaking my legs. I sagged against Aury’s side, clinging onto his hand. I could still feel Moth watching me, but thankfully he remained silent.

“This is the first time we’ve ever had someone in this camp try to kill a fellow raider.” Anchor’s dark eyes were hard as she stared at Cutter.

“I didn’t try to fucking kill him.” Cutter was breathing too hard, his face drained of colour above his mask. Begrudgingly, Lilac shoved him into one of the stools lining the counter.

“You pushed him off the goddamn camp wall,” Anchor said through gritted teeth. “Even if you hadn’t intended for him to go over, you knew it was a huge risk. You’re a liability, Cutter.”

Cutter was silent for a long moment as his breathing audibly sped up. “That’s convenient, isn’t it,” he spat. “Call the cripple a liability. Makes it easier to get rid of him now that he’s useless.”

“It’s not about that, and you know it.” Anchor took a step forward, hands clenching. “And I’m not deciding your fate on my own.”

“Can I?” Lilac interjected, twirling his machete in an easy grip.

“The whole camp is,” Anchor continued, ignoring Lilac. I squeezed Aury’s hand tight as we watched in silence. “We’re all going to decide what to do now. So it’s fair.”

“Nothing about this is fair,” Cutter shouted. “You let that thing in here and look at everything that’s happened since. *Fuck* you. Fuck this fucking camp.”

“Ghost, round up the camp, would you?” Anchor said in a hard tone, staring at Cutter as he slumped on the table, breathing hard.

I nodded quickly and pulled Aury with me as I stepped back outside, unwilling to let go of him. Years ago, Rig had drilled an old bell into the wall of the diner, beside the door, at the request of Cat, who found it funny using it to call camp meetings. I rang it now, and watched the raiders start trickling toward the diner from all corners of the camp.

Nun peered down from the wall. “Need us?” she called.

I nodded. “Won’t take long,” I shouted back. “Taking a vote.”

She gave a thumbs up and disappeared. I pulled Aury back into the diner so we could tuck ourselves into the corner before it filled up with raiders. It wasn’t long before everyone was here, Nun and Keen bringing up the rear from keeping watch.

“We can’t take long, because we need eyes back on the wall,” Anchor said shortly, facing everyone with her hands on her hips. She looked more decisive than she had in months. “Some of you may have just seen. Cutter just pushed Ghost off the camp wall.”

There were several horrified gasps. Eyes swung to me, then Cutter, and I wanted to shrink back from the attention. Aury squeezed my hand.

“He’s only standing here alive because Aury managed to catch him before he hit the ground,” Anchor continued. “So now we have to decide what to do.”

There was silence. “About what?” someone asked hesitantly.

“About Cutter.” Anchor gestured at him. He was breathing hard like a trapped animal, the fabric of his mask sucking in against his mouth. “About whether we want someone like that in our camp.” She looked around at everyone with intent eyes. “Do you feel safe with him here?”

No one said anything for a long moment. Then Rusty spoke up, voice uneasy behind her white mask. “No,” she said. “He’s volatile.”

There were several murmurs of agreement, but no one else seemed willing to outright say anything. Anchor nodded once. “Then we’ll take a vote. On whether Cutter can stay.”

“What?” He swung his head round, face blotchy and eyes bloodshot. “You’re kicking me out into the Wastes?”

“Not necessarily,” Anchor replied calmly. “We’re voting on it. And if the vote does go that way, we’ll give you supplies. We won’t send you out empty-handed.”

Cutter was vibrating with fury, and when his good hand clenched into a fist, he hissed a pained breath and relaxed his fingers to grip the arm above his stump. He was shaking, but I didn't feel anything when I looked at him. I expected to at least feel anger. He'd just nearly killed me. But there was nothing.

"All those in favour of letting Cutter stay?" Anchor asked. I couldn't bring myself to count the raised hands in the room, so Lilac did it instead.

"Eight," he told Anchor, and I swallowed hard as Cutter made a small sound, terror bleeding through the torrent of rage now.

Even though his fate was already decided, Anchor gave a small nod and continued. "And all those in favour of removing Cutter from the camp, and sending him out with a supply of food, water and a weapon?"

As I raised my hand, I lifted my head and my eyes met Moth's. He was watching me, and as I stared back at him, his pierced lips quirked into a sad little smile.

I looked away again as Lilac, with his own hand raised, announced, "Ten."

My brow furrowed, about to tell him he'd miscounted—there were twenty of us here, and Cutter obviously didn't get a vote. It had been twenty-one before Cat vanished. But then I remembered that Rig was gone, and pain sliced through my gut.

"Okay." Anchor exhaled. I could tell she was unnerved by the enormity of this decision we'd just made, but she did a good job hiding it. She turned to Cutter. "The camp's voted, Cutter. Because of your actions today, you'll be removed from the camp. We'll give you supplies, but if we see you near here again, we'll have to take drastic measures."

He was breathing so hard he was practically snarling, chest heaving. His eyes were sunken in his skull, face ashen. "You're all goddamn morons and you're all going to die."

"Is that a threat?" Lilac asked casually, still holding his machete.

"No, it's not a threat," Cutter spat, then jerked his head toward Aury. "It's a statement of fact, because you're letting this thing stay in here. It's going to kill all of you."

"That's enough," Anchor shouted, forehead going ruddy with anger. "Lilac, find something to tie him up in here. I'll go gather a small bag of supplies for you. Then you're leaving."

"I want a gun," Cutter burst out, shooting daggers at Aury.

“You’ll get a knife,” Anchor replied. “We’re done here, everyone. Say goodbye to Cutter if you want.”

No one did. Even those who had previously agreed with him about Aury sidled out of the diner without saying a word.

As Bo handed Lilac a length of cord to tie Cutter up, I turned to look up at Aury. He gazed back down at me, straight brows tugging slightly into a worried frown. But when I smiled up at him, hope blooming in my chest, he smiled back.

Cutter was leaving. Vile, bigoted Cutter who hated Aury merely for what he was. He would be gone. And Aury had controlled his change. He hadn’t killed anyone.

Maybe we could stay.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

We didn't watch Cutter get kicked out. As much as I disliked him, I didn't particularly want to witness the intense fear he had to be feeling at having to make his own way alone out in the Wastes—especially with a hand missing. I'd been out there countless times alone, and I still felt that fear.

He was given time to pack some stuff from his room. Bo and Daisy prepared a bag of food and water for him, and Anchor selected a knife for him to take. Once Apollo had checked over his stump again and deemed the stitches intact and the healing wound infection-free, he was escorted out of camp by Lilac, Nun and Anchor a few hours before sunset.

Part of me worried that he was going to go and find a group of raiders like Ryker at the Topeka camp and bring them back here to take over. That was, if he survived the night. It was a risk—a big one—and one of the reasons that other camps apparently didn't take such a merciful approach when raiders did awful things. Dead raiders couldn't bring enemies to a camp doorstep. Bitter, vengeful, living ones probably would.

It made me want to follow him, to make sure he went far, far away. But I tried to push it from my mind as Aury and I walked to my room, hand-in-hand. Both he and Rig had told me that my anxiety could be crippling, and I knew that logically. It was hard to switch off, though.

Thankfully, Aury distracted me the moment we were back in my room by crowding me against the wall with a playful grin. After gently pulling off my mask, he swooped down to kiss me. And it was a definite 'I'm going to fuck you very, very soon' Aury kiss, which I was wonderfully familiar with, and had missed so much it hurt.

"Mmm." I cupped his face, shivering when his forked tongue sank between my parted lips and brushed against mine in a soft caress. He did it again, more firmly, as his hands burrowed under my shirt and smoothed around my sides to the small of my back.

I moaned again and dropped my hands to clutch his sides, sliding my palms up and down. God, there was so much power in his body. And life. I could feel it thrumming, pumping through the dark, prominent veins that I could trace even through his shirt. I drew him closer until our hips were nestled together. Aury moaned against my mouth, deepening the kiss, his

tongue gliding over mine, even as he kept it agonisingly slow, like he was savouring every second.

I felt Aury's hard cock pressing against mine through our pants, and I let out a stuttered groan into his mouth as I tried to make the kiss more aggressive, thrusting my tongue. Aury just moaned—a low, sultry sound that made my dick get even stiffer in a painful rush—and started to suck on my tongue.

When he started to move his hips—a slow grind against mine—I couldn't stop the desperate sound that vibrated into his mouth. Our tongues glided together again and Aury finally increased the tempo with a helpless moan. I whimpered, my dick throbbing in my pants.

I started trying to shove Aury's coat off his shoulders, desperate for him. It didn't take him long to catch on, and we stripped each other in a rush, kissing messily the whole time, parting only to pull off our shirts.

Once we were naked, Aury gave me another long, brain-melting kiss before sinking to his knees in front of me. My breath caught, chest heaving with my panting breaths as he trailed hot, wet kisses down my stomach and over my hip.

When he sucked my cock into his mouth, I huffed out a pleasured breath and fisted his hair, neck arching back to rest my head against the wall I leaned on. It was cold against my shoulders, but I could barely feel it, my body and brain entirely focused on the wet heat and the suction of Aury's mouth.

Aury moaned around my dick, making it pulse with a bead of pre-cum as I shuddered. When I looked back down to watch, I gritted my teeth at the sight of him stroking his own cock as he sucked me hungrily. Then big, dark eyes flicked up to look at me through long lashes, and he lifted that hand. I spread my legs wider in anticipation.

I bit down hard on my lower lip to keep from making too much noise when I felt a slick fingertip circle my rim. Aury pressed inside a moment later, slow and gentle, and my body sucked him in. He found my prostate with unerring accuracy and stroked, making my knees threaten to buckle.

"G-g-god," I gasped, fingers clutching tighter in his hair. My cock throbbed in his mouth, and I felt my nuts pull up tight. "Oh shit, I'm g-g-gonna—"

Aury sucked up and off my cock with a low moan, grinning up at me while I trembled, my lips parted around shuddering breaths. My dick

twitched, jerked against his mouth, and Aury pressed a kiss to the weeping tip, which made everything so much worse.

He sank a second finger inside, still watching me. I gasped as my cock jerked again when his long fingers glided over my prostate. By the time he carefully slid in a third, I was sweating and panting and trying to hold back all the noise I wanted to make. My legs shook, threatening to give out, so I slumped back against the wall and clutched Aury's hair as an anchor.

"P-p-please—" I gasped. Aury must have taken pity on me, because he licked the pre-cum off the head of my cock, his black, forked tongue curling and making me shudder even harder with pleasure, before sliding his fingers free.

But instead of standing up to fuck me, his hands grasped my hips and spun me around so my cheek was pressed against the cool wall. Before I could even react, his hands spread me wide and that long tongue was thrusting into my ass.

"Oh my *god*." I scrabbled at the wall for purchase. My cock jerked between my legs, so close to coming without even being touched, because his tongue felt *unbelievable*. He withdrew it to lick my hole, his forked tongue circling as he moaned.

I was ready to pounce when he gently turned me back around. Aury's cock dripped as he stood up, so much that a long, thin thread was almost connecting his cockhead to the floor. His chest heaved, black eyes burning with lust.

My cock bucked with excitement when Aury grabbed my ass and lifted me, pressing me into the wall. I wrapped my legs around his hips, crossing my ankles beneath his ass. I was already panting with anticipation when I felt the leathery brush of his wings as they flexed against my shins.

Aury resituated his grip on my ass, and a second later I moaned out a low sound through gritted teeth when I felt a long finger stroke my still-slick hole.

Aury groaned low. "Gage." He nuzzled my cheek, his quick breaths fanning against my jaw. "Can I—"

I was already nodding, grabbing at his shoulders, his hair, the back of his head, trying to tilt my hips up further so he could get inside me. "Yeah—please—Aury—"

I shuddered, my head falling back against the wall when I felt the blunt head of his cock applying gentle pressure against my hole. I exhaled a slow

breath and bore down, wincing only a little when the head sank inside after a moment of resistance.

The sting slowly faded as Aury's lips found mine, his forked tongue sliding into my mouth while his cock sank deeper. I moaned against his mouth, clasping his head between my hands and tightening my legs around his waist, mindful of the few small barbs at the centre of his back.

As Aury's hips finally met my ass, I felt his lips curve up into a grin against my own. My nuts tightened. Shit, he was so sexy.

I cracked my eyes open in time to see Aury's wings flex, stretching out for a moment before they seemed to shiver as he pulled his hips back just a little and drove forward again.

"*Unh,*" I grunted against his mouth, watching in fascination as his wings gave another little shiver when Aury moaned. His fingers tightened on my ass, splayed fingertips digging into the skin.

The last of the lingering pain faded, but I still felt stretched wide. My body relaxed a little, and I clutched Aury's shoulders as I kissed him again. "Aury," I mumbled restlessly against his mouth.

He grazed his teeth over my lower lip, making me shiver, before breaking the kiss to lower his head. Pleasure coursed through every inch of me as he nuzzled my jaw, then my neck, while his hips began to move in earnest.

"Oh, god," I breathed, head thudding back against the wall again. My chest was already heaving with my quick breaths, heart hammering like a drum. Aury's ass flexed against my crossed ankles, and I tried to spur him on to move faster.

Soon, his hips were pounding me into the wall, and I knew we were making *way* too much noise, but I couldn't bring myself to care. I moaned out a low sound with every thrust of his hips, getting hoarser and more desperate. I released my death grip on his shoulder to reach down and fist my cock, which was jerking between us with the frantic movement of our bodies.

Aury moaned, head tipping down so he could watch. I tried to go slow at first to give him a show, sliding my thumb back and forth over the wet tip, shuddering at the slick friction. But when I started stroking, the thin tether on my control snapped. My fist shuttled up and down, the sound of me jacking my cock loud in the room, and my toes curled behind Aury's back

from the hot stab of pleasure that tightened my nuts and made my ass clench up around Aury's cock.

"Gage." His voice was a ragged mess, and he lifted his head to gaze at me for a second before crushing his lips to mine.

I moaned against his mouth, brows pinching as I started to shake. Aury was relentlessly grinding against my prostate, and my prick was achingly hard in my fist. With my shoulders against the wall and Aury's hands holding my ass steady, I let go of his other shoulder to reach down and cup my nuts, trusting him to hold me up.

My breath left me in a rush when everything tightened. I furiously stroked my cock to take me over, tongue thrusting into Aury's mouth as the pleasure built, and built, and oh shit it was coming—

I shook wildly and let out a helpless sound against Aury's mouth as I started to come, my cock throbbing in my tight, trembling fist, spurting rope after rope between us. It was getting everywhere, and Aury broke the kiss to look down between our bodies. He must have loved the sight of it, judging by the way he groaned out an almost inhuman sound.

His hands tightened on my ass, holding me still for his pounding hips as he brought himself to the edge. His wings twitched wildly before snapping wide open as his hips punched forward one last time and I felt his cock kick inside me. Aury buried his face in my neck, moaning as his body shook and his wings flexed rhythmically with every jerk of his cock. My half-hard dick twitched in my trembling fist at the sight of it.

We were both breathing hard, and I felt Aury's lips curve into a little grin against my neck. "I've missed you," he said, voice hoarse, and I let out a breathless huff of laughter.

"I missed you too, dork." I wished I could wrap my arms around his neck. Instead, I slid my palms up and down his sweat-damp chest. He was still holding me up, his slowly softening cock still inside me, and it felt amazing.

Aury lifted his head and leaned in to kiss me, lips soft and drowsy now. I let out a surprised sound, muffled by his mouth, and clutched his shoulders as he stepped back from the wall and carried me over to the bed. Even though it wasn't dark yet, we climbed in and nestled together.

My body finally relaxed for the first time in days, like it was letting out a long sigh. I nudged Aury's chin with the top of my head so that I could bury

my face against his throat, breathing in his scent. I knew I had to clean up, but I didn't want to yet.

Long fingers threaded through my hair. "So we go and find Rig?" Aury asked me.

I nodded, placing a hand beneath his sternum so I could feel the thrum of his life seed. "And we practise controlling your change while we're out there, to see if we can stay. But…" I lifted my head to smile at him. "I think we will. I think you'll be able to control it fine, Aury."

There was still a hint of trepidation in his gaze, but Aury nodded at me. "I do feel… It feels different here," he admitted, voice soft. "Safer. Like I…"

He trailed off, but I could tell what he'd been about to say. "Like you belong." I leaned forward to kiss him. "Because you do."

He belonged with me.

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AURY

Quiet.

His voice was a cool balm, low and quiet, and I smiled into the pillow as I listened to him read to me from the book in his hands. I didn't even take in the words. I just focused on that soothing voice—the voice that had cut through all the noise in my head that day—that had made me lucid enough, for a few precious moments, to ask two strange human raiders with masked faces for help.

The mind of the rycke was a swarming place, overflowing with the memories of every rycke that had ever lived before it. When I had been locked in that cell, I'd retreated deeper and deeper inside my own mind until I was trapped in there, not knowing what was real and what was just a memory.

It had been endless flashes of intense pain. Of bright white lights, stinging my eyes. Of gasping for breath as thick vapour filled my tiny cell, only for it to stop as abruptly as it had come, then return, again and again, and I had never known why. I'd never been able to understand what they were doing, or why they were doing it. I remembered them slicing strips from my wing, sometimes for fun, other times carefully sealing them in bags and taking them away. Taking my blood. Cutting neat little squares out of my skin. Shearing off locks of hair. Any part of me they could take, they did.

It had been a cycle of white noise and pain and angry memories of violence, until one day, foreign sounds cut through the swarm in my head. Screams, gunfire, shrieks of bending metal. I remembered my cell door creaking open, a tall, hooded figure standing there for long moments, their blackened fingertips twitching when they saw me. One of the last telyths. I'd tried to speak to him, but the words wouldn't come, my head spasming as I tried desperately to sort through the noise in my mind.

Then he was gone, and I was alone again, but the air was thick and dark, and my eyes stung, blinding me. I couldn't move my hands and it felt like I was dragging a monumental weight on my back when I finally left my cell, on legs that shook because I hadn't used them for so long. I hadn't moved for so long. My blood surged in my veins, eager for vitality, my life seed giving a low throb of want. We had been starved of all things for so long. Warmth, light, the night sky, real air, touch, others—

My first moments outside of those four blank, white walls in years, and I stepped into chaos. Humans fled, screaming, sobbing, begging for their lives, shooting at monsters that tore through the building in a rare, coordinated effort to wipe out a common enemy.

I flinched from it all, the noise, the movement, the rage and despair and hate that filled the air as thickly as the smoke choking me. I wanted to get away. I needed to get out, but I was stuck, my arms were stuck, my back hurt, something was caught on me and I couldn't shake it off.

And then I was pinned down, a bar of red-hot metal swinging from the ceiling and crashing against my face. I could feel my skin burning. I could smell it. I could hear the hiss of it sizzling and feel the heat against my tongue. I pushed it away, but then something else was falling as the building burned, and white-hot pain in my leg took my vision for a moment.

I stumbled forward, each step bringing a gasp when I put pressure on my left leg. The fire roared in my ears. The building rumbled as it collapsed in places, metal shrieking and concrete tumbling in on itself. Creatures around me let out bloodcurdling sounds, feasting on screaming humans, whimpering and screeching when they saw me. There was so much noise, and so much pain, and I wanted to scream but my mouth wouldn't work, my throat was closed up, and I couldn't move my arms and my back ached with the weight I was dragging and—

"Aury?"

I blinked at the sound of the soft voice. Warm sunlight pricked my eyes, and I felt the worn fabric of the pillow beneath my cheek. My head twitched hard, then again, and cool fingers were suddenly trailing over my scarred cheek, soothing me.

"Are you okay?" the voice asked, and I opened my eyes to see Gage's worried blue ones just inches from my own.

The sight made me smile, chasing away the dark and painful memories. "I'm fine." I reached out and tugged him closer to plant a kiss on his mouth.

“Keep reading.”

He continued watching me, worry creasing his brow in that sweet little frown he wore far too often. “Are you sure?” He gestured at the book. “Is the book too—”

“Everything is fine, Gage.” I kissed him again, trailing my hand down his side to his hip. “We won’t have much time to read when we leave to look for Rig, and I want to finish this book before we go.” I grinned at him.

Gage huffed, as if he knew I was deflecting, but he reluctantly sat back and opened the book. I shuffled closer to rest my head on his naked hip, sliding my hand up and down his thigh. I loved the feel of the short, crisp hairs beneath my palm.

As Gage started reading again, my mind drifted once more, as much as I tried to concentrate on the words he was saying and not just the soothing cadence of his voice.

We would be leaving the camp in the morning to begin our search for Rig. The thought of coming across Mary didn’t scare me. I would never let her hurt Gage—or Rig—and I wouldn’t let her take me, because that would hurt Gage just as much.

But I was worried about Rig. And I worried about Gage being out in the Wastes for so long. I would protect him with my life, but what if something happened and I wasn’t there? What if I turned my back for a second and something snuck up and got him? I remembered those soldiers hiding out in that house. They had been so close to shooting Gage. I had been so close to losing him.

He was so fragile. His human body so vulnerable. I had to do everything in my power to keep him safe.

Humans could die so easily, but the rycke chose its death. Our bodies didn’t fail. The life seed didn’t die. When we were done with living, we simply allowed the earth to take us back, to use our body for new life. When Gage’s human life came to an end, I would follow him. I knew it deep in the core of me already—there was no question. He was my mate.

But until then, I would keep him safe. We had many years before that. I could feel the life in Gage’s body, strong and vibrant, because it sang to me now, tethered to the life seed. I liked the thought of giving my life, my memories, to the next rycke, because Gage would live on in them forever. He would be a balm, a reprieve from all the darkness. A sweet, delicate bloom that stayed rooted deep in the earth in the eye of a swirling storm of

death and rage. I would make sure of it—I would make sure that my memories of him were never lost. I would make them the brightest spot in my mind.

But first, we had our lives to make all of those memories. We still had many, many years left, and I planned to spend all of them with him.

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Author’s Note

Thank you for reading Aury and Gage’s story. Or Ghost and One’s. Or the rycke and his human’s. Raider names and mute monsters keep things interesting.

It was fun being able to flesh out how humans who aren’t in the military live out in the Wastes—how they’ve made their homes safe enough to stay alive out there, and what being a raider means. Which, in Ghost’s case, means doing the shitty jobs no one else wants because you’re a pushover and scared of pissing anyone off. Poor Ghost.

Ghost is a big ball of anxiety. He catastrophises. He has a healthy dose of imposter syndrome. Ghost—I feel you, babe.

Aury is… *chef’s kiss* a precious sugar muffin, with a tiny wicked streak and also a, um, not so tiny one, but that last one isn’t his fault. It’s just a rycke thing. I highly suggest you search for an image of a goblin shark so you can see just how… different Aury looks when he reaches final form.

I feel like the build-up for Aury may have ended up being at odds with how he actually is. But my aim was for the legend to have been distorted—similar to Wyn. He’s not as bad as people think! He’s lonely and kind of vulnerable, but everyone’s scared of him, or, at the very least, they avoid him.

Ghost and Aury were both basically smitten from the outset, but Ghost’s anxiety and Aury’s recovery meant they still built up a gentle, meaningful relationship before it turned into more. I think my favourite scenes to write were the ones where they were getting to know each other, and Aury was slowly coming out of his shell to Ghost. They’re both just so damn precious.

We met a lot of other new peeps in this one. Sweet, naïve, hopeful Rig, who wants to save Aury, and then wants to save Mary’s pet beasties. Anchor,

who had a pretty crappy time. She is under immense stress. She misses Cat terribly, and doesn't like running the camp without him.

And we can't forget Lilac. He's creepy and maybe a psychopath, but he's also that unassuming voice of reason for Ghost's slight hysterics and Rig's unbounding naivety. I am insanely excited to write his story.

We also got to meet a character who was first mentioned in Soul Eater—Moth. (He was Edin's 'contact' for the Nebraska camp, who would have accompanied Danny there.) He's half-human, half-monster, so he's a pretty freaking rare butterfly. As Aury says, he's almost as rare as the rycke. Almost.

He's also hopelessly in love with Ghost, but… ya know… sorry, Moth.

Thank you so much to Kate, who has been incredibly patient with my anxious rambling and made this book so much better with her notes, suggestions and proofing skills.

And thank you everyone who has enjoyed the books so far, said such kind words about them, left reviews or posted about them. It still kind of totally freaks me out that people have read these and enjoyed them, but freaks me out in the best way.

What's next?
Next up, we are revisiting our original monster-human couple, Danny and Wyn, for a novella from Wyn's perspective!

And… in this novella, I may be backtracking on some things I've said before. This backtracking may make you either love me or hate me. So many people said they wished Wyn and Danny's time together wouldn't be so short—as in, Danny's-human-lifetime-short. Same with Edin and Hunter. So, okay. Let's fix that. You want Wyn to be able to have some more time with his human? I have ideas to make it happen, so I'll make it happen.

After Danny and Wyn's novella (which I am already halfway through), it's going to be Rig's story. Why doesn't the big grey dude speak? Or does he?

What’s under that cage? Why is Mary the actual worst?

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Monster Index

Rycke [reek]: One of the old races, but not long-lived. Humanoid species. 001 at the military's Nebraska base—the first monster specimen the military captures. Feared by almost all other monsters. Described by Edin as 'unfathomably powerful—a dichotomy of unlimited violent rage and a peaceful, gentle nature'. Do not like causing harm, but become unstoppable when pushed to their limit. Fiercely protective by nature. Gain strength with age.

There is only ever one rycke, though there used to be many before they almost wiped themselves out. The rycke has a life seed inside them that gives them life. When the rycke dies, their body nourishes the seed to grow the new rycke. The seed brings with it the memories of the previous ryckes.

Appearance: Huge black, sinewy wings. Barbs on the side of their neck and down their spine. Dark, bird-like feet. Prominent black veins all over their body. Greenish-grey fingernails.

Aury has several scars, including a fairly severe burn scar on the right side of his face, which happened during the fall of the military's Nebraska base. His specimen brand is located beside his left shoulder blade. Until recently, his right wing was ruined, rendering both wings basically useless. He has chin-length, slightly wavy black-green hair. Big black eyes that have pinpricks of colour if you look close enough.

When Ghost is threatened, Aury changes form. This form is around twenty feet tall and his wings have a span of about sixty feet. He has four-foot-long barbs covered in jagged teeth down the length of his spine. Greenish-white skin with thick, raised, prominent black veins. Black talons on his hands and feet. A huge protruding jaw that juts out from his face, like a goblin shark. Giant, sunken black eyes, and a cavity instead of a nose. Basically, he ain't pretty.

He is observed by Danny in his cell at the military's Nebraska base in Book One, and mentioned by Edin in Book Two, before finding his human in Book Three.

Soul Eater (species name: telyth [*tell*-ith]): One of the old races. Only seven remaining, including Wyn. Humanoid, single-gender species that is

born from eggs. Has the ability to dissipate into thick black smoke; can travel great distances this way. This ability is obstructed by behamots, whose rock-like skin sends vibrations that prevent dissipation. 015 at the military's Nebraska base. A species that does not need to eat, drink or sleep.

Appearance: Tall, rangy muscular build. Pale, greyish white skin. Long fingers with black-stained tips. Black, curling horns that have jagged edges. Prominent brow bone and flat, bridgeless nose; sharp cheekbones. Thin, raised ridges across the curves of the forehead and cheekbones. Very sharp teeth.

Wyn is completely covered, head to toe, in scars. He has one pure black eye, and one that is white with just a tiny pinprick of a pupil. Long black hair. He typically wears heavy black boots, black pants, a loose black shirt and a long, grey coat with a ragged hem and a hood that conceals his face.

Isdernuc [*iz*-der-nuck]: One of the old races. Edin's species, but he is the only one left after a rycke killed the rest of the last remaining tribe more than 5,000 years ago, when Edin was still an adolescent. Humanoid species. 002 at the military's Nebraska base. A species that does not need to eat, drink or sleep.

Appearance: Close to seven feet tall, with six-inch-long horns that curve up over the forehead. Pale lavender coloured skin. Extremely muscular. Long, prehensile tail with sharp tip. Dark purple hair and eyes, which are bigger than a human's and have much bigger irises. Craggy, intense demonic features. Fangs.

Edin wears a black kilt that ends just below the knee, heavy black boots, and a metal pendant on a leather strap around his neck, which is the last remaining item of his pack's that he owns—it is a piece of a metal bowl his mother made. Part of his right horn gets snapped off in Book Two, leaving the end of it jagged. He doesn't need to sleep, but he likes to—it energises him.

Parasite (species name: unknown): A parasitic monster that infects humans. They are the same species as Wyn; he can detect them, so he destroys them to stop them wiping out humanity. Capable of injecting deadly venom through its bite as a defence mechanism when threatened or a nest is attacked.

The life cycle of a parasite is as follows: a hatchling will crawl inside the mouth of an unaware human—usually while they are asleep—and into the digestive system. The human will, at this stage, start feeling somewhat ill as the parasite begins consuming all of the nutrients in the body as it prepares to lay its eggs. Once the eggs are laid in the stomach, the parasite uses its sharp teeth to escape the stomach; it expels a glue-like substance that it uses to 'patch' the tiny tear it has made in the stomach lining so that the host stays alive long enough to incubate the eggs. The parasite will then latch onto the spinal column to control the host's brain activity and keep the host functioning as the eggs incubate. During this time, the parasitic eggs continue to absorb nutrients through their permeable linings, causing the host to lose weight rapidly, weaken and eventually become too ill to function. When the eggs are ready to hatch, the host will expel them from the stomach and die, the parasite dying alongside it. The eggs then hatch and go off in search of new hosts.

Queens live in nests, laying eggs. A queen produces a thick jelly that creates the environment the eggs need to incubate outside of a host. She is normally tended to by worker parasites, which are bigger than normal parasites, and bring the queen food and tend to the eggs when they are ready to hatch, sloughing off the queen's jelly.

Appearance: Full-sized parasites at the end of their life cycle are about the size of a small rabbit. Dark, scaly skin. Twelve legs, thin and spindly and covered in hard bristles. Flat face with wide eyes like a housefly that curve around the sides of its head. Circular mouth with sharp teeth.

The parasite spawn expelled by a host is a thick, grey mucus, with the darker eggs visible. Hatchlings are tiny versions of adult parasites—about the size of a bumblebee.

Worker parasites are bigger—about the size of a small dog.

Queens are huge—car-sized—and shaped more like a tick, with a thinner thorax and a fat, bloated abdomen that is usually swollen with eggs. Two dozen legs with sharp ends that she uses as weapons.

Aytorin [ay-*tohr*-in]: One of the old races. Humanoid species. Fairly introverted, with not many left. Speak an ancient language that holds power; knowing an aytorin's true name grants control.

Appearance: Tall and bipedal. Grey, mottled skin.

Encountered in Book Two by Hunter, Edin, Danny and Wyn; and by the Nebraska camp in Book Three. This aytorin is owned by Collector Mary. He is chained to an RV being pulled by two borolesh. He has a cage on its head, and is dragging a huge war hammer.

Behamot [*bee*-ya-mott]: Described by Edin as 'tough, but not particularly smart'. Very hard to kill—the only ways of destroying them are to push them off a great height, causing their rock-like skin to shatter, or to set them on fire. A species that eats and sleeps. Meat eaters.

Appearance: Around seven-and-a-half to eight feet tall. Dark grey skin that is pebbled and rough like stone; basically impenetrable and as hard as rock. Squashed face with big tusks jutting up from their lower jaw.

Encountered by Hunter, Charlie, Edin and Wyn in Book Two. Also encountered long, long ago by Edin and Wyn when two behamots were taunting the Soul Eater about squishing his head under a big boulder, and Edin showed up to help—ripping his own arm off in the process.

Borolesh [*bohr*-oh-lesh]: Large, gentle species. Herbivores. Move on all fours. Pale skin the colour of sand that is wrinkled and hairless. Droopy, sagging faces. Three long, curving horns protruding from their bald heads. Long arms.

Observed in Book Two by Hunter, Edin, Danny and Wyn; encountered by the Nebraska camp in Book Three. Two borolesh are owned by Collector Mary, and they pull her RV across the Wastes.

Cagin [*cay*-jin]: Muscular, bear-sized monster with dark brown hide that's thick and solid, like armour. Domed, gleaming back that is impenetrable—even bullets can't get through—but its weakness is on its underbelly, if you can stay alive long enough to flip it over. Long head with a split snout. Teeth that grow in every direction. Long, thin eyes. Poor eyesight, excellent sense of smell. Makes a soft warbling sound.

Cagins eat very infrequently, so will stalk the prey they choose for as long as it takes.

Encountered by Ghost and Aury in Book Three, when it is stalking a group of soldiers barricaded in an old house. It runs at the sight of Aury.

Forileun [fohr-*il*-ee-yun]: Invertebrate species. Secretes a poison from its claws that amplifies pain receptors to incapacitate its prey.

Appearance: About seven to eight feet tall on all fours. Four legs that are segmented and covered in hard bristles, ending with small claws that let it grip. Long, thin body (shaped, as Hunter describes, 'like an ear of corn') covered in dark bristles over a shiny exoskeleton. Long, curving neck and low-hanging face. Rectangular, vertical black eyes that wrap over the top of its head. Blunt, thick teeth.

Encountered by Hunter and Charlie in Book Two.

Karik [*kah*-rick]: A creature that looks like a large, land-walking squid, just with more legs that are sturdy, so it can run—fast. Mottled, blueish-purple skin that looks wet. Huge, bulbous eyes and a big mantle. Its beak is a big white protuberance fringed with little teeth. Their suckers can rip skin clean off the muscle. One rips Edin's leg off when he is young, and Wyn comes across him and helps him. This is how they meet.

Encountered by Ghost in Book Three, when one has moved into the military's Nebraska base after the rycke leaves. It chases him, but gets distracted when it is attacked by another monster.

Kerenis [keh-ren-iss]: Creature that hunts and feeds on anything warm and living; constantly searching for meals, which it smothers before consuming. Next to impossible to kill.

Appearance: Black blob-like monster that moves by rolling its body over itself in a constant undulation. Its underbelly is covered in teeth and ringed by thick black fronds that let it sense vibrations and movements from nearby creatures.

Encountered by Danny and Wyn in Book One.

Koleb [*koh*-leb]: Fairly primitive species that travel in big packs via tunnel networks that they dig. Known for their pilgrimages where the tribes meet to offer the best sacrifice to their god, in exchange for plentiful harvests and bountiful young. A species that eats and sleeps. Vegetarian.

Appearance: About four feet tall. Greenish-grey skin. Thin with spiny, hunched backs. Long arms that end with two long, clawed fingers. Long, floppy ears. Big mouths filled with shark-like teeth.

Encountered by Hunter and Charlie in Book Two.

Mortik [*mohr*-tick]: Invertebrate species. Opportunistic hunters that lure their prey in by camouflaging themselves depending on their surroundings. Some have adapted since coming to the human world. Nocturnal.

Appearance: Described by Hunter as a ‘cross between a beetle and a scorpion, but the size of a cow’. Six segmented legs. Long tail with extremely sharp stinger that secretes acid-like venom. Head that mimics a human face; small black eyes and open mouth with a long, thin black tongue that it tastes the air with due to poor vision.

Seen briefly by Danny in Book One; encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two in the tunnels.

Myrm [muhrm]: Big, worm-like creatures the size of a horse, covered in dark hair. Six short legs. Long, curving neck. Blank face with a wide slit for a mouth and two tiny black holes for eyes.

Observed by Ghost in Book Three, when he and Aury stop at the river after visiting the Topeka camp. Described by Edin to Hunter in Book Two —a myrm is the reason Edin was caught by the military and became specimen 002. He came across one that had been trapped by the military and was freeing it when they tranquilised him.

Wanuk [wah-nuk]: A monster-world creature, about the size of a small pig, that resembles a large naked mole rat but with a beak instead of teeth, and six long, thin legs that end in sharp points.

Edin hunts one for Hunter and Charlie at the homestead in Book Two, but they decline to eat it.

Unknown: Thin, bony monster that is hairless and a deep burgundy colour. Head shaped like a blank teardrop on its side, a smooth round skull thinning to a sharp point for a snout. Two small black eyes. Four spindly legs that end in two tiny claws, similar to a tarantula’s tarsal claws. Makes a strange chittering noise when it’s excited.

Encountered by the Nebraska camp in Book Three. One is the domesticated pet of Collector Mary. It sleeps in her RV and enjoys being carried in her arms like a baby. It apparently tries to eat Cutter’s hand when Ghost and Aury are away from the camp, which causes all kinds of problems.

Unknown: Extremely tall monster covered in pale hair, with arms so long they drag on the ground. Fairly aggressive.

Encountered by Ghost in Book Three, when one distracts the karik that is chasing him, giving him the chance to escape.

Unknown: Short, wide female monster with yellowish-green, wet-looking skin. Lightbulb-shaped head with no discernible neck. Four long arms that end in three thick, tentacle-like fingers. Long, thick, dark green, rope-like strands protruding from her head that move independently. Flat face; thin lips and no nose—just two slitted nostrils. Long, thin eyes with horizontal pupils.

Encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two; one of them mans the sign-up table at the fighting competition. She hits on Edin and Hunter gets bratty about it.

Unknown: Tall, gangly monster with ‘freakishly long’ limbs (according to Hunter) with an extra joint. Covered in coarse brown hair.

Encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two; one of them guards the front prison entrance where the fighting competition is held. Nosy. Bit of a creep.

Unknown: Humanoid species. Tall, hulking monster with leathery tan skin that’s hairy in places. Thick, clawed fingers. Beady black eyes. Big tusks that distort his lower lip.

Encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two; he is the lover of the fightmaster at the fighting competition.

Unknown: Humanoid species. Big, muscular monster with pale grey skin covered in scars. Thick, dark mane of hair that extends down its back.

Seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, at the fighting competition. It is chained up, and being forced to fight by another small, wiry species of monster with six arms.

Unknown: Humanoid species. Predatory and graceful. Long hair.

Seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, pacing in a cage at the fighting competition.

Unknown: Tall, wispy pale monster, dressed in long dark robes. Moves like it is almost floating. Long fingers. Featureless face except for two small dark eyes.

Seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, at the fighting competition. It is the owner of the human fighter who Charlie goes up against.

Unknown: Troll-looking creature. Pebbled, mustard-colour skin.

Seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, at the fighting competition. It is the owner of the human fighter who Hunter has to fight.

Unknown: 014 at the military's Nebraska base. Slender female monster. Blue-black skin. White hair that floats around her head. Sharp teeth.

Observed by Danny in Book One in her cell.

Unknown: 008 at the military's Nebraska base. Described by Danny as 'the stuff of literal nightmares'. Skin like old leather. Long arms and fingers; hands with extra knuckles. Rows of solid black and white eyes that ring the entire front half of its head, blinking sporadically. Gaping mouth crowded with needle-sharp teeth.

Observed by Danny in Book One. It appeared to be in agony and constantly raging in its cell before it vanished one day under classified circumstances.

Unknown: 007 at the military's Nebraska base. Tall, slender humanoid species. Non-gender-specific. Pale grey. Angular yet flat face with alien-like features and big dark eyes.

Observed by Danny in Book One, standing in the centre of their cell, unmoving.

Unknown: Female monster species. Sunburnt red skin. Long arms and legs. Small, open ring of tentacles for a mouth. Two thin slits for nostrils. Circular black and white eyes.

Encountered by Danny in Book One, as the leader of the small pack that try to take Danny. Destroyed by Wyn.

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About the Author

Lily Mayne writes what she loves to read: achingly sweet yet gritty romances against unusual backdrops—dark, futuristic, dystopian and more. She enjoys reading and writing (duh), baking, watching terrible horror movies and many other hobbies that would have potentially made her an ideal Victorian maid. Just a really lazy one.

She currently lives in the UK with her husband and several fluffballs, who like to make a lot of noise while she's writing.

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